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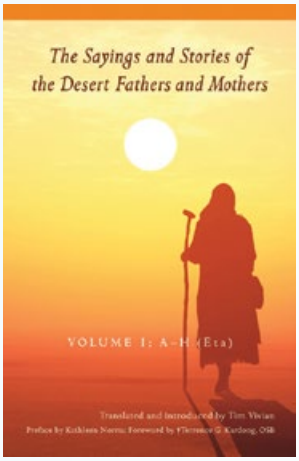

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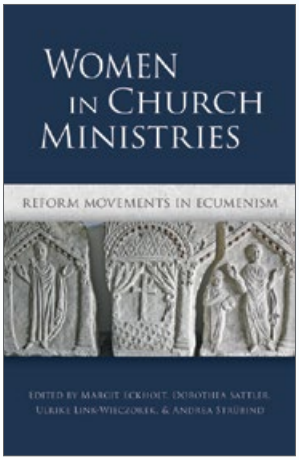

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COVER DESIGN
Cecilia Guerrero Rezes

COVER IMAGE
CNS photo/ Louisa Gouliamaki, pool via Reuters

Commonweal
FOUNDED IN 1924

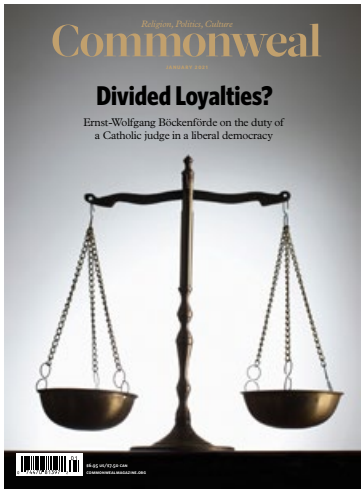
Commonweal [ISSN 0010-3330], a review of religion, politics, and culture, is published monthly, except for a single July-August issue, by the Commonweal Foundation, 475 Riverside Drive, Rm. 405, New York, NY 10115. Telephone: (212) 662-4200. Email: editors@commonwealmagazine.org. Fax: (212) 662-4183.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

LETTERS

Leading by example

LET THE CHILDREN LEAD

Rita Ferrone rightly praises liturgical inculturation in her column "'Our Eucharist Is a Feast'" (January). Until a few years ago, this was happening in our parish in England, using Pope Paul VI's Directory on Masses with Children. Then we were sent a newly ordained assistant priest who was uncomfortable with the shortened readings, the Gospel and Old Testament dramas, and the children's Eucharistic Prayers. During his first Advent with us, he refused any dressing up of shepherds, angels, and the Holy Family, and unilaterally dismissed the children's liturgy leader, whose family from then on worshiped elsewhere.



We had made every effort over the years to celebrate the Word with the children in mind. This had enthused parents and other parishioners as well: picture John and Peter running to the tomb on Easter morning; David sparing Saul's life despite Abishai's all-too realistic gesture with the spear; a couple dozen children lying on the floor pretending to be the infant Samuel hearing God's call; or a group of children singing a passage from St. Paul to the congregation.

That Christmas, a tradition was lost. A missionary who had presided over one of these children's Masses suggested complaining to the bishop. We did not do so, feeling that he would close ranks with the year's one new priest, leading to continuing friction and division in the parish. Were we mistaken?

Incidentally, *Missa Luba,* a Congolese setting of the Latin Mass, dates back to the 1950s—surely a sign of a liturgical movement underway well before the council. At that time, I was a child in a Redemptorist parish where the priest led children in singing English paraphrases of the prayers of the Mass as it unfolded behind the Rood Screen. Another forerunner of opening the liturgy to the children and, through them, their parents.

I hope other parts of the world follow the Democratic Republic of the Congo in forming and firming local liturgies. I also hope this includes Anglophone countries, saddled with a stilted translation and a clerical reluctance to make use of the prayers, gestures, and movements available.

Maurice Billingsley
Canterbury, United Kingdom

CATHOLIC TEACHING & CIVIC DUTY

As I read Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde's writings ("A Christian in the Office of Constitutional Judge," January), I thought of a prayer I often say: "Lord, help me to be the disciple you want me to be." As I get close to entering my eighty-second year on this earth, I can relate to Böckenförde's struggle to hear the answer to that prayer. The institutional Church is not always helpful in hearing it; it took me a while to realize the difference between "the Catholic Church" (the People of God) and "the Catholic hierarchy."

Commonweal

FOUNDED IN 1924

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LETTERS

Like Böckenförde, I struggled with the abortion issue in doing my civic duty. Following the voice of the Catholic hierarchy, I now realize, caused me to vote for some poor candidates who did damage to our body politic. I have come to understand that my understanding of a zygote as human life is more of a belief and not something that is self-evident to all of my fellow citizens. So the question then becomes: Can I tolerate those who do not agree with me that abortion equals infanticide? Or should we be like our Maker who so respects human freedom that He permits its tragic consequences to play out in so many areas of human activity?

Böckenförde rightly understood that in a pluralistic society we Catholics need to be very careful with calling all abortion a punishable crime. If only the Catholic hierarchy would listen to his wisdom.

Michael Petrelli
Westfield, Ind.

SERIOUS JOURNALISM

Paul Moses's story should be added to the graduate curriculum of serious journalism schools at CUNY and Columbia. "The One Missing Fact" (January) is a marvelous case study that separates the valuable wheat of journalism that scrutinizes everything from the worthless chaff of reporters who just use stenography.

Gene Roman
Bronx, N.Y.

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Convict Him

We Americans tend to think of democracy as our national birthright rather than as a fragile achievement that depends on social conditions subject to decay. We spend a lot of time celebrating our pluralism—it deserves celebration—but we sometimes forget that a political community is possible only where people have certain things in common. Without some common beliefs about what is true and what is false, what is real and what is fantasy, the political debates that are the lifeblood of democracy quickly degenerate into mutually unintelligible shouting matches, until words give way to blows.

That is what happened on January 6 in Washington D.C. A mob of Trump supporters, whipped into a fury by the president himself, stormed the U.S. Capitol in order to prevent Congress from certifying Joe Biden's electoral victory. Their parallel universe of conspiracy theories, echoed and amplified by Trump every day since the election, suddenly broke out of the confines of social media and into the real world, where reckless words can still draw blood. Five people, including a police officer, died as a result of the failed insurrection. The former vice president, who had finally refused to help Trump sabotage the certification, came within minutes of being confronted by rioters chanting "Hang Mike Pence!" Lawmakers hid behind barricaded doors as gangs of QAnon devotees and white supremacists roamed the halls of the Capitol, trashing offices and shouting violent threats.

All this was the predictable consequence of a political environment where even the most basic facts are in dispute, and where unwelcome realties are immediately dismissed by nearly half the country as "fake news." It would be foolish to imagine this problem will simply disappear now that Trump has left office. Rapid technological and cultural changes are distorting our politics in ways we are only now beginning to reckon with. When the Founders enshrined a free press in the Bill of Rights, it was partly because, as Thomas Jefferson put it, "a well-informed citizenry is the best defense against tyranny." But today the biggest obstacle to a well-informed citizenry is not government censorship or even Big Tech gatekeeping but the well-documented tendency of social media to insulate willful ignorance and encourage mass delusion. Today misinformation is often much more profitable than real journalism, and much of the American public appears to have little immunity to it.

But none of this should distract us from the former president's responsibility for what happened at the Capitol. In its article of impeachment, the House of Representatives correctly described Trump's actions as the "willful incitement of insurrection." He knew exactly what he was doing when he sicced his mob on Congress. It was, after all, the logical culmination of what he had already been doing for months: claiming, without evidence, that the election had been stolen from him and goading his supporters to "take back" their country. At the rally before the riot—after incendiary speeches by his son Donald ("We're coming for you!") and Rudolph Giuliani ("Let's have trial by combat!")—Trump told the crowd that they were going to have to "fight much harder" and "show strength." Otherwise, he warned, "You will have an illegitimate president…and we can't let that happen." The election had been fraudulent, he insisted, and "when you catch somebody in a fraud, you are allowed to go by very different rules." So they would march to the Capitol and "encourage" Congress to "stop the steal." "We will not take it anymore," he vowed. "We fight like hell."

He, of course, did not fight: he went straight back to the safety of the White House to watch the ensuing riot on television. Trump's defenders claim he never intended for the mob to become violent, but in that case why didn't he intervene as soon as he saw what was happening? He could have told his followers to disperse; he could have sent in troops to defend the Capitol (Pence had to do that for him). Instead, Trump said nothing until it was all over. The most reasonable inference is that he was pleased with what he saw. Afterward, he told the rioters that he loved them and understood how they felt.

The Senate now has a duty to convict Trump on the article of impeachment passed by the House. Some have argued that this is pointless since he is no longer president, while others say it should wait until after the Senate has confirmed President Biden's cabinet appointees and passed another COVID relief package. But nothing could be more urgent than holding Trump accountable for the armed attack on Congress. It was, as the Yale political scientist Bryan Garsten has argued, a brazen attempt by the head of one branch of government to subject another branch "to intimidation and violence in an effort to produce a particular decision by force." If that is not an impeachable offense, it is hard to imagine what could be. Trump's last desperate ploy struck at the very root of our constitutional system of self-government. Nor would a conviction be a merely symbolic gesture: it would allow the Senate to bar Trump from ever again holding federal office, including the presidency. In a healthy country that might seem unnecessary. Who could possibly support Trump for *any* office after all that has happened in the past three months? The sad answer, according to polls: most Republican voters. *January 21, 2021*

Warnock's Way

Faith was a defining feature of the Georgia special-election campaign that helped give Democrats control of Congress and the White House for the first time since 2011. The Black church and progressive religious activism took center stage, helping make Rev. Raphael Warnock—the son of a sharecropper who grew up in public housing—the state's first Black senator.

The pastor of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. once presided, Warnock belongs to a distinguished lineage of Black liberation preachers. From Howard Thurman's seminal work, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), to *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), to *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011) by Warnock's mentor James Cone, this prophetic tradition understands the Gospel through the prism of Black suffering and oppression wrought by centuries of white supremacy and systemic racism. Catholic liberation theology emerged from Latin America as a response to violence, extreme inequality, and poverty; in similar though distinctive ways, Black liberation theology grapples with slavery, Jim Crow, and the contemporary injustices of voter suppression, mass incarceration, and police brutality. It's an understatement to say that the discomforting truths illuminated by Black liberation preachers clash with the predominant strain of white Christianity, which largely focuses on personal behavior and individual salvation at the expense of structural injustices and social sins.

Along with bringing renewed attention to the power of Black liberation theology, Warnock's win is instructive for shifting the narrative about faith in politics, especially in red states where religion is a central player. The Religious Right has spent decades investing in organizing faith leaders and conservative voters. But even if religious progressives are attracting more media attention than in the past, the Democratic Party and liberal funders still too often pay attention to religion only when an election cycle comes around. Transactional relationships aren't built to last. Long-term investment and infrastructure-building with a diverse coalition of religious voters and faith communities are essential.

Stacey Abrams understands this. The leading force behind Georgia's turn to blue, Abrams founded Fair Fight and the New Georgia Project, organizations that redefined the state's political calculus with a massive effort to register new voters, especially voters of color. In 2018, that effort registered more than two hundred thousand new voters, and it increased to eight hundred thousand new voters this year. "My faith is central to the work that I do, in that I not only hold Christian values, but my faith tradition as a Methodist tells me that the most profound demonstration of our faith is service," Abrams has said.

Warnock's victory doesn't have to be an outlier. A progressive, prophetic religious approach to justice and politics can be a winning ticket across the country. A new moral majority—multiracial and interfaith—can begin to reclaim faith from the grip of reactionary white Christians who have defiled the Gospel since long before Trump's election. The pro-Trump rioters who stormed the Capitol in January, many holding "Jesus Saves" signs and waving Confederate flags, stand in the way of making that future a reality. "A new America is emerging, and that's why you see the expression you saw yesterday," Warnock said in an interview a day after the insurrection. "It is the desperate, last gasp of an old problem that knows it's on its last breath." But Trump is a symptom of deeper ills that will not disappear now that he is out of office. Realizing that new America will require committed donors who understand the power of faith as a catalyst for social change, and a tangible commitment to organizing. Faith demands hope, but it also needs a strategic plan.

—John Gehring

A Failed Auction

Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), one of the largest conservation areas in the country, includes a 1.5 million–acre coastal plain that is home to polar bears, migrating caribou, and hundreds of other animal species. It sits atop what some estimate to be billions of barrels of oil. So it came as no surprise when, despite the objections of the indigenous Gwich'in, environmental advocacy groups, and 72 percent of Americans, the Trump administration rushed forward with a January 6 auction of twenty-two tracts of land on the coastal plain. What is surprising is that the auction fell well short of the government's $900 million goal, raising instead a paltry $14.4 million.

The auction was the first of two required by the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, which projected the leases could offset up to $1.8 billion of Trump's massive giveaway to corporations and the wealthy. Its inclusion in the law was the culmination of a forty-year battle to gain access to drilling on the coastal plain, the only part of the ANWR open to potential development, pending congressional approval. But the plan fell flat: half the tracts received no bids at all, and almost all of those that did were leased at rock-bottom prices to a state-owned development group that hopes to sublease them in the future. Not a single major oil company bid. America's six largest banks have refused to finance any energy exploration on the coastal plain. Lawsuits contesting the auction have been filed by national and local environmental groups; by Trustees for Alaska, who represent the Gwich'in; and by attorneys general from fifteen states. Plaintiffs argue that the environmental-impact survey conducted to sanction the leasing program "drastically underestimated" the effect of its emissions, and that development on the coastal plain threatens land central to the subsistence and culture of the Gwich'in.

Republicans have long justified their relentless determination to undermine environmental protections by claiming that deregulation and investment in fossil fuels will create economic opportunities, but the result of this auction proves the diminishing force of that argument. There is no appetite, even within the energy industry, for expensive, relatively inaccessible Alaskan oil, especially when a global pandemic has caused an enormous drop in demand, and when public pressure to shift away from fossil fuels and protect the planet has been mounting for years.

The fossil-fuel industry isn't motivated by a newly developed conscience, of course, but by economics and optics. Nevertheless, this is part of an encouraging shift, one precipitated by people all over the world showing their support for stronger climate protection through their protests, their consumer choices, and their decisions at the ballot box. On Joe Biden's first day in office, he issued a temporary moratorium on all oil- and gas-leasing activities in the ANWR, directing the Interior Department to review the environmental impacts and "alleged legal deficiencies" of the leases the Trump administration finalized on its last day. With a Democratic majority, Congress can also pass legislation to overturn the mandate requiring a second auction. To combat the real concerns of people whose livelihoods depend on fossil fuels as the world moves toward a greener future, the government will need to further invest in new technologies and provide training for alternative-energy jobs. Momentum for action continues to build: in a recent survey of registered voters by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, 66 percent said that developing sources of clean energy should be a high or very high priority for the president and Congress. Challenges remain, but the undeniable failure of the ANWR auction should give hope to anyone who cares about the planet.

—Isabella Simon

Vaccine Delays

A year after the first cases of COVID-19 appeared in the United States, the gargantuan task of vaccinating 328 million Americans is progressing at anything but warp speed. The absence of a coordinated national response, inadequate funding for states and localities, and chronic lack of investment in public-health infrastructure have, perhaps predictably, hampered admittedly ambitious rollout goals and tempered the optimism that came with the arrival of effective vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna last fall.

The federal government had hoped to vaccinate at least 20 million people by the end of 2020. But according to the CDC, a month into 2021 only 10 million people have received the first of two required doses, and just 1.6 million have been fully vaccinated. While the Trump administration's $18 billion Operation Warp Speed initiative accelerated vaccine development, only $340 million of that was allocated to help states administer shots. The federal relief bill passed in December included $8 billion for vaccine distribution, but it would have been far better had the money come much sooner. "States can't make a contract or plan for anything or hire someone until they have that money on hand," said Kelly Moore, the deputy director of the Immunization Action Coalition.

Neglecting to set a clear national strategy, the Trump administration left states to handle their own vaccine rollout, though many were already overwhelmed from dealing with the pandemic so far. Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina have vaccinated less than 2 percent of their residents. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo faced criticism for threatening $1 million fines for not following distribution requirements, even as unused doses expired. But the rollout in Florida, the state with the second-highest number of people over the age of sixty-five, has been particularly chaotic. Older Floridians have encountered crashing websites, and county phone lines have been swamped with calls (in some cases receiving up to two thousand per minute). The proliferation of fake vaccine-appointment postings has only added to the confusion, especially as real appointments remain available. Some Florida counties have turned to the website Eventbrite, better known for registering for bar crawls and concerts, to organize appointments.

The uneven rollout also reveals the price of failing to invest sufficiently in public-health infrastructure. The United States spends $3.6 trillion on health care annually, but less than 3 percent of that goes to public health. Public-health initiatives have "saved the most lives by far, for the least amount of money," Tom Frieden, a former director of the CDC, said in an interview with the *New York Times Magazine*, "but you'd never guess that based on how little we invest in it." That's left states scrambling to find freezers and equipment for storing the vaccines, train and hire people to administer doses, and fund public-outreach campaigns to convince people who might otherwise be unwilling to or unaware of how to get a vaccine. (As of December 2020, 27 percent of Americans said they still wouldn't get a free COVID-19 shot—a crisis in its own right.)

A week before his inauguration, with the number of COVID-19 deaths approaching 400,000, Joe Biden detailed the specifics of his American Rescue Plan, a $1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package that would allocate $20 billion for a national vaccination program. The plan lays out a more involved role for the federal government in accelerating vaccine distribution, and proposes making the vaccine free to everyone regardless of immigration status. It's a promising first step toward achieving his goal of 100 million vaccinations during his first hundred days in office. Hopefully, it's also the start of a much-needed reinvestment in public health writ large.

—Katie Daniels

CATHLEEN KAVENY

Thinking Latinly

Remembering Reginald Foster

Reginald Foster, OCD, the celebrated Latinist who died in December, committed one act of civil disobedience in the course of his duties for the Vatican. Tasked with making the official Latin version of a text written in Italian or Polish by Pope John Paul II, Reggie came across a phrase referring to Latin as a "dead" language. He just couldn't bring himself to translate that. So he successfully proposed substituting the adjective "ancient" instead.

To conscript Latin to confirm its own demise was existentially unacceptable to Reggie. His life's work was communicating the language's vitality to generations of students, including me. I spent the better part of three summers in Rome, participating in his famed Aestiva Romae Latinitas, which was held in the basement of a Catholic elementary school up the Janiculum Hill near San Pancrazio. The class was not for the faint of heart: it required six hours a day, six days a week of sight translation while seated at a child-sized desk in an overcrowded auditorium with no air conditioning and fifty other sweaty students in Rome's sweltering June and July. A weekly *ludus domesticus* (Reggie called it "home play" rather than homework) took about five hours to complete. Sundays were field-trip days: after meeting at the crack of dawn at Termini train station, the class set off on public transportation for Pompei, Ostia Antica, or Hadrian's Villa, where we would translate sheets of text that Reggie had prepared specifically for each weekly destination. The entire experience was mesmerizing, exhausting, and just marvelous.

Why did Reggie love Latin so much? As every article written about him attests, he was a deeply disciplined Catholic monk, sleeping only a few hours a night on the floor of his bare cell at the Teresianum. He was also a great eccentric, eschewing his religious habit for garb more customarily found on a Maytag repair man because he felt that current working-class attire better reflected the original purpose of the habit in today's world. So it can be tempting to reduce his love of Latin to pious instrumentalism serving

JOHN PIAZZA

Reginald Foster

Catholic theology, on the one hand, or an arcane hobby, like collecting train timetables, on the other.

But Reggie never trivialized Latin by treating it as a mere hobby. He always insisted on the language's intrinsic value. Furthermore, as he made quite plain, he did not have much use for contemporary academic theology. But that does not mean that Reggie had no theology himself. As I reflected on my experiences in the class, I began to see that his view of God's relationship to human beings was encapsulated not only in the Latin language, but also in the way he taught his summer course.

Let's start with English. Because it is a largely uninflected language, the meaning of an English sentence is determined by word order: meaning runs in one direction. That one-directionality of meaning has implications for how we experience time. We English-speakers tend to imagine ourselves moving rigidly in a single line, from the past through the present toward the future. By contrast, Latin is a highly inflected language, so the meaning of a sentence is determined not primarily by word order but by the endings of the words. In English "man bites dog" means something different from "dog bites man"—word order is everything. But in Latin, "vir mordet canem" means "man bites dog"—but so does "canem mordet vir" and "mordet vir canem." Studying Latin suggests that structure and order are valuable not for their own sake, but for the way they engender freedom. The rigor of Latin's system of inflection creates a certain liberty of word placement without sacrificing clarity of meaning. That frees up new possibilities for beauty in both poetry and prose. In Latin, as in Christian anthropology, law serves freedom, not the other way around.

Latin's inflections also enable us to draw together the beginnings and endings of sentences in ways foreign to the experience of English speakers. So the first word and the last word of a complex Latin sentence may be joined as subject and verb. If an English sentence is more like an arrow moving relentlessly through space, a Latin sentence is more like a set of nesting Russian dolls or a chiastic pattern of A B C D D' C' B' A'. Reggie taught us to start translating in the middle and move to the edges. Nothing is left behind. Everything is gathered in and recapitulated, just as it is in salvation history. God wills to save us all together, not only the last bitter remnant of us.

In teaching his summer classes, Reggie didn't merely teach us to translate Latin. He also encouraged us to think Latinly. By conducting the class in Latin, by repeating a sentence slowly so that we would absorb its packets of meaning, he reprogrammed our expectations of sentence patterns to loosen the vice grip of English linear progression. As I went through the summer program, I found that this linguistic reprogramming precipitated a corresponding theological reprogramming. It allowed me, for example, to understand better what Augustine meant in book XI of the *Confessions* when he said that unlike time, in which one possesses mere slivers of one's being in succession, eternity was marked by possessing all of one's being at once. *Non autem praeterire quicquam in aeterno, sed totum esse praesens.* An English sentence progresses like Augustine's understanding of the parade of time, each word's meaning succeeded and replaced by the next. In contrast, it's easy to imagine a Latin sentence as a symbol of eternity, a bowl gently holding all its meaning together at once.

Thinking Latinly makes the past and the future relate to one another in a more intimate manner. It also makes the people of different eras more relatable to one another. Over the course of a week in the summer program, we were exposed to classical prose, classical poetry, medieval theology, high Renaissance Latin, and contemporary Latin. Reggie considered all the authors of these texts to be part of the community of Latinity, along with the unnamed and long dead illiterate prostitutes and servants who spoke Latin in ancient Rome. Latin wasn't the mark of an elite cadre; it was the language of a vibrant and varied swath of humanity. Reggie had no patience for those who wanted to use Latin as a weapon of exclusion in the Church or in the academy.

In fact, Reggie viewed Latin as a point of connection. As his fame grew, people came from all over the world to take his summer class. Devout Spanish seminarians in soutanes sat next to agnostic graduate students with purple hair from New York and Berlin. High-school Latin teachers from the Midwest mingled with American expatriates living in Rome. We had nothing in common with each other. But Reggie forged us into a community of learning, which was built on the cultivation of empathy.

For example, Reggie was well known for assigning agnostic students sentimental passages of religious devotion, while tasking pious Catholics with the bawdier passages from Plautus. Some people thought this was a mischievous amusement. But I came to see it as an instantiation of his moral worldview. We all quickly learned that making sense of unedited texts from difficult Latin authors required us to step imaginatively into their shoes; we needed to understand what they wanted to say and why, in order to figure out what they actually said. But most of us didn't think we needed to extend the same courtesy to our contemporaries, especially if they spoke our language. Because we understood their words, we assumed we grasped their identities. Over the course of the class, Reggie showed us that we were wrong to do so. Empathy, mediated by Latin, can be both necessary and sufficient to bridge secularism and soutanes. In Latin just as in theological ethics, love of neighbor goes together with love of God.

Reggie died on Christmas Day, which seems beautifully fitting to me. He really was a Christmas Catholic, because he celebrated all that is good about God's creation, whether found in Christian sources or appropriated from elsewhere. And of course the Church's celebration of Christmas absorbed and transformed Saturnalia, the most popular holiday on the ancient Roman calendar. It was joyous and raucous and sometimes sweet. According to Catullus, it was *optim[us] dierum*—the best of days. Reggie would love it.
In pace requiescat.

SUSAN BIGELOW REYNOLDS

A People, Not an Army

What the language of war reveals about our response to the pandemic

At dusk on the eve of the presidential inauguration, Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, and their spouses stood on the National Mall. Behind them glowed the Washington Monument. The reflecting pool was flanked by beams of light. That day, January 19, 2021, marked almost exactly a year to the day since the first reported case of COVID-19 in the United States. It was also the day the country surpassed four hundred thousand deaths from the virus.

"To heal, we must remember," Biden said during his remarks. "It's hard, sometimes, to remember. But that's how we heal." Vice President Harris echoed the idea that in the face of social trauma, ritual itself is an act of survival. "For many months, we have grieved by ourselves. Tonight, we grieve—and begin healing—together." They encouraged all Americans to light candles in their windows as an act of collective mourning.

Watching the livestreamed memorial for the victims of the pandemic felt like shaking off the bleary hangover of a nightmare, blinking awake from a cloudy half-reality. In its ordinariness and symbolic familiarity, the ritual seemed like the most obvious act imaginable: *right, of course. This is what we should have been doing all along.*

In many ways, the service of lament felt like the first honest words we've heard about the pandemic from elected leaders. Hundreds of thousands of people have died early, lonely, confusing deaths. We've lost jobs and sanity and the consolation of friends, classrooms and communities and rites of passage, the everyday touches and public intimacies of an embodied life. The losses are incalculable. Everything has gone wrong. It has been a terrible year.

The ritual felt true precisely because it avoided the typical rhetoric used to describe our response to the pandemic. Soon after the virus arrived in the United States, the lexicon of war became, predictably, the default way of talking about the situation. Doctors and nurses were "front-line soldiers" in a campaign against an "invisible enemy." The dead had lost their "battles" with COVID-19. Such language persists in the commentary on vaccine development—"Operation Warp Speed" sounds like a cartoonish riff on a military campaign. In a January 4 interview on National Public Radio, Dr. Leana Wen decried the slow vaccination rollout. "We need a *wartime effort*," she emphasized, led by an "*army* of vaccinators."

These war metaphors for disease are so ingrained in common speech that it is almost hard to come up with alternatives. Such metaphors have their merits—summoning strength, evoking courage—but they are ultimately inadequate. In her 1978 essay *Illness as Metaphor*, philosopher Susan Sontag argues that cloaking speech about disease in metaphorical language assigns to pathogens a moral quality and their sufferers a sense of punitive responsibility. Those vanquished in their battles against their internal enemies have perhaps, we can't help but think, not fought hard enough. They've failed.

If the war analogy has proved at all illuminating, it has been primarily in unintended ways. It is revealing, for example, that the phrase "wartime effort" is meant to evoke images of World War II–era scrap metal drives and chambray-clad Rosie the Riveters—and not the wars in the Middle East in which the United States is currently involved. In the twenty-first century, American "wartime efforts" primarily consist of transferring the burden of sacrifice to the shoulders of the poor who fight these wars. Like war, then, the pandemic's effects have been mediated at nearly every level through human-made structures of inequality.

In a country fixated on individual rights, the lexicon of war can seem like the only language we have for collective action. This is both lamentable and ironic. In different ways, both our ongoing wars and the splintered pandemic response demonstrate that Americans are, by and large, unpracticed at sacrificing for the common good. We like the idea of sacrifice but most often opt for sacrifice-by-proxy. Embracing a kind of warped substitutionary atonement, we

President Joe Biden and his wife, Jill Biden, attend a coronavirus memorial event at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., January 19, 2021.

CNS PHOTO/TOM BRENNER, REUTERS

call certain classes of people heroes—doctors, nurses, essential workers, soldiers—as though that alone justifies their bearing the burden of death.

Ultimately, the pandemic-as-war comparison is disingenuous. The analogy would have demonstrated its utility had such language successfully fomented support for mobilizing and synchronizing the full resources of the government to stem the virus's spread. This did not occur. While Congress annually approves hundreds of billions of dollars in military spending, lawmakers had to be cajoled into passing even the most modest pandemic relief. The Defense Production Act—a wartime innovation giving the president power to harness the resources of American industry in order to meet the material needs of a crisis—would have been helpful had it been invoked in a timely, strategic manner. Instead, ever the fan of reality television, Donald Trump took what seemed like perverse delight in watching states battle one another for respirators and PPE. In all its macho energy, the lexicon of war has failed us.

It should come as a relief, I think, to finally admit that the COVID-19 pandemic is nothing like a war. War relies on learned inhumanity. Killing an enemy requires being desensitized to the humanity of both the enemy and oneself. To listen to the words of medical workers and the loved ones of the dead is to confront inescapably the depth of human grief in its rawest form. There is no camouflaging our fragility. Only compassion, solidarity, and love can bring us to the other side of this. In his invocation at the January 19 memorial service, Washington D.C. Cardinal Wilton Gregory said it best: "Our sorrow unites us to one another as a single people with compassionate hearts. May our prayer strengthen our awareness of our common humanity." As we enter the pandemic's second year, perhaps it's time to lay down our armor and approach the work ahead not as an army but as a people.

There is no camouflaging our fragility. Only compassion, solidarity, and love can bring us to the other side of this.

EBTESAM ATTAYA ISLAM

COVID Fatigue

Life in an intensive-care unit

There will be no sit-down rounds before seeing the COVID patients today. As I enter the Medical Intensive Care Unit (MICU), a COVID patient is crashing and needs to be intubated. The halls that had previously been filled with families visiting their loved ones and greeting the nurses and doctors are now crowded with the empty "COVID suits" that health-care workers must put on before they visit COVID patients. The ghostly silhouettes of these strange outfits remind us of what we are fighting. I quickly put on my gear: hospital-issued scrubs, a hazmat suit, two sets of gloves, an N95 mask, goggles, a face shield, and a cap. Equipment that used to be readily available is now rationed to me only upon request.

But this first patient needs to be intubated, so I switch to my powered air-purifying respiratory unit—a helmet connected to a machine that supplies purified air—hoping it will work today and not fog up on me. Someone looks me over to make sure I'm as protected as I can be before I go into the patient's room.

Meds, bougie, endotracheal tube, C-Mac, oral airway, oxygen-saturation level on the monitor. The intubation is successful, but the dread persists: Will this COVID patient survive? There are moments when this all feels like pantomime. We do what we are supposed to do, walk the stage, say our lines. But the reality is that, even if we hit our marks, many of our patients will not survive. I have COVID fatigue.

I spend the next two hours stabilizing the patient, hoping that everything we do will give him a better chance of living till the next day. I prepare for more procedures with another sterile layer to protect the patient, a third set of gloves on top of the two I was already wearing. I squeeze my fingers to help with circulation before I start my procedures. Sweat runs down my back from the layers of PPE, the hazmat suit, and the warmth of the room. My goggles and PAPR keep fogging up as I try not to stick myself with the needle.

I work in the Medical Intensive Care Center at the University Medical Center in Lubbock, Texas. The death rate in this part of the state is among the highest in the nation. To date, Lubbock County, whose total population is just over 310,000, has had more than 45,000

CNS PHOTO/CALLAGHAN O'HARE, REUTERS

A health-care worker at United Memorial Medical Center in Houston rests on an empty hospital bed amid the coronavirus pandemic, December 30, 2020.

cases of COVID-19 and more than 630 deaths. I have been caring for critically ill COVID-19 patients since last March.

Since I'm already gowned up, I continue doing my in-person rounds. The team waits outside the room to notify me of overnight changes, phone updates, or alarming labs before I enter a patient's room. (I will go over each individual patient's data again later this evening on my own, in the quiet of my office.) Every time I finish with a patient and exit his or her room, one of my staff sprays me down with an antiviral solution. I gently scold the nurse to wear her goggles before she sprays me down—the staff know my feelings about how important it is for them to protect themselves. Then I move on to the next room. I enter each room with a heavy heart. I have to be careful not to pull the IVs running across the room, the ventilator cord connected to the control panel outside, the hoses from the dialysis machine to the patient: it would spell disaster if any of these became disconnected. A game of MICU Twister, with high stakes. Finally, I make my way to the patient. Some patients are upright, some on their stomachs; almost all have an endotracheal tube coming out of their mouths. Most are sedated, some paralyzed. I touch, I examine, I talk to them. Can they hear me? I open the doors and shout questions at the nurses because they can't hear me through my mask and the door of a negative-pressure room. Then I close the door again and continue assessing the patient.

I make my rounds with the MICU iPad so that I can FaceTime family members and let them know the latest about the status of their loved ones. "Nothing new to report." "Kidney function is worse—we need to do dialysis." "Their condition has not changed in days." "They are worse. You should come up for a family meeting." Or: "I would like to get palliative care on board."

I miss being able to talk with my patients. Those who can speak utter only a few words before having to pause and cough violently, or before the alarm bells go off because their oxygen saturation level has dropped precipitously. When they can, they ask questions. "Am I going to make it?" "Am I doing better?" "When can I go home?" I miss making small talk; sharing little jokes with patients about their lives and loved ones; meeting family members in person and getting a glimpse of their lives. I miss telling patients, "You're gonna be OK." Because you cannot do that with COVID. With COVID, even if you recover and go home, you are not the same person who arrived at the hospital. And you never know when you'll have to come back, or what you'll come back with. Even if they've made it out, I may meet my patients again because of continued shortness of breath, exhaustion, memory loss, or a whole host of other post-COVID problems.

I have COVID fatigue. I cannot erase the memories of patients dying. I cannot forget the moment when my ten-year-old child sat with me at night and asked, "Are you going to die?" I told her, honestly, I would do my best not to; I didn't know what else to say. These days I am often at a loss for words. (I was never at a loss for words before.) I cannot forget how it felt to wear an N95 mask around the house in the early days of uncertainty about PPE rations, and gently push my kids away to keep them from hugging me, pretending I was a duck with my duckbill mask so as not to frighten them. I cannot forget the devastation of standing outside my parents' house, waving at them to say hello and to check on them. I feel pangs of gratitude when nonmedical people tell me they're doing their part by staying home, wearing their masks (over both mouth and nose!), or by pleading for the welfare of health-care workers.

I am worn down by witnessing so much suffering and death every day—many times a day. When I ask my nurses "How are you?", they answer with heartfelt confessions of sadness, anxiety, depression, short-temperedness. And even without hearing it, I can see that the light has gone out in their eyes. They text me the day's death count and their secret confessions that they went home and cried for hours in the bathtub so that their family wouldn't see their pain. They share with me their frustration, their hopelessness. They write to me: "We sweat our butts off putting PPE on and off all day and no matter what we do to save these people, most of them die." "This is not what we went into nursing to do. We became nurses to help save lives and to show compassion." "I feel like a ping-pong ball…just helpless at the end of the day. People do not understand the emotional and physical stress we go through every day." We reassure one another that this too shall pass, but I can't help asking myself: At what cost—to ourselves and to our families? We all have COVID fatigue.

We reassure one another that this too shall pass, but I can't help asking myself: At what cost—to ourselves and to our families?

Another press conference. Another letter. Another plea. Another visit. Another talk. Another treatment. Another scolding. "Wear your masks. Cover your nose and mouth. Social distance." "It's not about you." We watched, we wrote, we spoke.

My head lies heavy on my pillow. I close my eyes and see flashes of light underneath my eyelids, reminding me I've spent too much time staring at a phone screen, searching for answers, for new treatments, looking again and again at patient charts and imaging, hoping another answer will suddenly emerge. My dreams become another set of rounds. "What can I do? Did I try such and such? What if I tried that?" Then I wake up and it all starts again.

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ANDREW BACEVICH

Enemies Without. Enemy Within?

The internet & national security

NSA headquarters at night

NATIONAL SECURITY AGENCY/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

In December 2020, for the first time in U.S. history, the office of the presidency lay vacant. Having failed to win reelection to a second term, a petulant Donald Trump had effectively abdicated. True, he tweeted, golfed, and pardoned cronies, while ordering minions to pursue ever more outlandish schemes to overturn the will of the electorate. But though he still resided in the White House, Trump had ceased to make even a pretense of actually governing.

At this juncture, even as the dispiriting Age of Trump was winding down, the first national-security crisis of the Biden era erupted. News outlets reported a massive hack of government agencies and private enterprises. Almost universally attributed to the SVR, Russia's foreign-intelligence service, the attack confirmed what many ordinary citizens already suspected: American cyber defenses are drastically inadequate and the nation's entire information infrastructure is acutely vulnerable.

Apart from suggesting (without evidence) that China might be the hack's actual perpetrator, the incumbent commander-in-chief took no notice. President-elect Joe Biden stepped up to fill the resulting vacuum.

Sounding suitably presidential at a pre-Christmas press conference, Biden characterized cyber threats as "a grave risk to our national security" and pledged to mount a forceful response once in office. "Enough's enough," he declared. "In an age when so much of our lives are conducted online, cyber-attacks must be treated as a serious threat by our leadership at the highest levels. We can't let this go unanswered." Implicitly making a comparison with nuclear and biological weapons, Biden vowed to treat cyber threats with "the same seriousness of purpose that we treated threats of other unconventional weapons." He promised "to establish clear international rules and mechanisms to enforce them," along with "consequences for those countries that violate them."

What all of that might mean in practice remains unclear. Biden's language recalls the rhetoric employed a generation ago to discuss terrorism, to wit: let no one doubt American strength and resolve; the United States will track down perpetrators and bring them to justice; we will not rest until terror is eliminated, etc., etc. In fact, even today the U.S. national-security apparatus is clueless as to how to eliminate terrorism, which has become a problem to be managed rather than eradicated. So it will be with cyber threats.

Complicating the problem of establishing "clear international rules" to outlaw bad behavior is the fact that the United States is itself a leading cyber-thief. "This is business as usual," Bruce Schneier, a cybersecurity expert, told the *Los Angeles Times* in discussing the Russian hack. "The National Security Agency does this kind of thing all the time, and we are better at it."

Nor does the United States confine itself to mere thievery. Employing euphemisms such as "persistent engagement" and "defending forward," American cyberwarriors have long since gone on the offensive. Operation Olympic Games, which a decade

ago found the United States and Israel collaborating to disable Iran's nuclear-research program, offered a glimpse of things to come. A report issued last year by the congressionally mandated U.S. Cyberspace Solarium Commission emphasizes the imperative of maintaining the capacity to "strike back with speed and agility" in response to any cyber threats.

The Pentagon's official cyber strategy goes further, vowing "to disrupt or halt malicious cyber activity at its source, including activity that falls below the level of armed conflict." Indeed, for years now U.S. intelligence agencies have been waging their own undeclared cyberwar against various adversaries. In short, among U.S. cyberwarriors, the line between protecting and preempting is so fine as to be invisible.

Members of the political class prefer to feign innocence. The official script coming out of Washington charges Russia with launching an unprovoked and unwarranted attack. As if shocked to discover gambling at Rick's Café Américain, Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois characterized the hacking incident as "virtually a declaration of war by Russia on the United States."

As with earlier national security incidents of note—the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident offer notorious examples—the reality is somewhat more complicated. In cyberspace, Washington probes, identifies vulnerabilities, and preemptively targets. In short, whatever Durbin may purport to believe, U.S. government agencies systematically exploit the digital weaknesses of others and strike first. If the United States is preyed upon, it is also a leading predator.

For nervous members of the public, a nightmare scenario of a non-nuclear apocalypse lurks in the background: a surprise cyberattack that instantly turns out the lights, brings the economy to a screeching halt, and creates nationwide paralysis and panic. It doesn't require a particularly active imagination to foresee consequences dwarfing those that Americans have endured during the coronavirus pandemic.

POETRY

ROOD RIDDLE

Pete Green

I the East am one arm.
I am West the other.
My forehead is an unfurled
name. I will always be warm
with his body I bore like a mother.
My roots are the roots of the world.

PETE GREEN *was born in 1932; he graduated from Georgetown in 1954 and the U.S. Army in 1956. He spent twelve years in a Discalced Carmelite monastery, and now lives in Irvington, New York.*

INDUSTRY

John Linstrom

Brooklyn-bound bridge flight:
copper statue's slanting arm,
cranes of gray Bayonne

JOHN LINSTROM *is series editor of The Liberty Hyde Bailey Library for Cornell University Press. His poems and nonfiction have recently appeared or are forthcoming in* Atlanta Review, *the* New Criterion, *the* Antioch Review, *and elsewhere.*

The contemporary American way of life itself creates vulnerabilities that put that way of life at risk.

So what are ordinary citizens to make of mischief-making by Russian hackers? How worried should we be? Are we even worrying about the threats that are actually the most worrisome?

Here are a couple of observations offered by a layperson with no claim to being a tech expert.

First, in some respects, we are already in the dark. The entities charged with protecting us—primarily the United States Cyber Command, collocated at Fort Meade, Maryland, with the National Security Agency—operate in secret. They withhold from the American people not only their own methods (arguably justified), but also the details of what the SVR has uncovered (not justified). To an extent difficult to measure, they also surveil *us* without our knowledge or consent.

While generously resourced with taxpayer dollars, agencies responsible for U.S. cybersecurity are only nominally accountable. Knowing the full extent of U.S. cyber operations requires security clearances for which few readers of this magazine are likely to qualify. To assume that members of Congress are providing effective oversight requires ignoring the dysfunction and irresponsibility pervading contemporary American politics.

In some respects, our situation recalls the early days of the Cold War. Back then fearmongering senior military officers, e.g., Gen. Curtis LeMay, abetted by ambitious politicians, e.g., Sen. John F. Kennedy, demonstrated great skill in conjuring up "gaps" in U.S. military capabilities. During the 1950s, these supposed gaps—first bombers, then missiles—created opportunities, both bureaucratic and partisan. For the military-industrial complex (MIC), they provided a handy rationale for fielding a never-ending array of bombers, missiles, submarines, and warheads. Meanwhile, politicians seeking high office could decry the gaps and proclaim their commitment to creating arsenals "sufficient beyond doubt," as Kennedy put it. In fact, throughout the Cold War, our side never trailed the Soviets in nuclear strike capabilities. If gaps existed, they favored the United States. We cannot say for certain if a similar form of threat inflation is operative today. But neither can we eliminate the possibility. The national interest does not necessarily rank first among factors that shape national-security policy.

Meanwhile, the famous warning issued by Kennedy's predecessor in the White House has lost none of its pertinence. While *information* may have quietly replaced *industrial* as the MIC's second initial, today, even more than in President Eisenhower's day, ensuring that the MIC does its job so that "security and liberty may prosper together" requires "an alert and knowledgeable citizenry."

And there lies the rub. When enumerating the qualities that characterize American citizens in the present age, alertness and knowledgeability do not spring immediately to mind. Distracted and distraught, bewildered and beguiled, incensed and infuriated: these come closer to the mark, with information technology not least among the culprits contributing to a pervasive sense of angst that afflicts the population.

Meanwhile, regardless of what Russia or any other bad actor may be doing, our own dependence on that technology grows apace. This is true both individually and collectively. The contemporary American way of life itself creates vulnerabilities that put that way of life at risk.

Immediate and assured internet access has become the lifeblood of our economy. In a trend reinforced by the coronavirus pandemic, American cultural life has simultaneously moved online. Disturbingly, so too has our spiritual life. Since the coronavirus pandemic erupted, my wife and I have tended to fulfill our Sunday obligation by attending Mass virtually. Worshipping at Notre Dame's beautiful Basilica of the Sacred Heart while sitting comfortably on my living room couch in Walpole, Massachusetts—I mean, what's not to like?

By extension, except for a handful of hermits and eccentrics, the barriers to reasserting genuine autonomy—of living "off the grid"—have become all but insurmountable. Practically speaking, daily life today entails complying with the dictates of Information Age tycoons such as Messrs. Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg, who just might pose a greater concern than Vladimir Putin. Personally, I hate making purchases from Amazon. I do it anyway; for price and convenience, you can't beat it. And I can buy a book without risk of contracting a dread disease as a consequence. Nor could I have written this article without help from Apple, Microsoft, and Google.

As with dependency in any other form, once you're hooked, you're hooked—a point that the must-see documentary film *Social Dilemma* forcefully drives home. "What we learn in this movie," one astute reviewer writes, "is that our brains are being manipulated and even rewired by algorithms that are designed to get our attention and make us buy things, including buying into distorted ideas about the world, ourselves, and each other." Moscow's role in this subversive and corrupting process rates as somewhere between negligible and non-existent.

So who poses a greater threat to American freedom? The SVR? Or Silicon Valley? Or are we threatened on two fronts? The answer is surely both, but personally I fear the latter more than the former.

ANDREW BACEVICH *is president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. His new book,* After the Apocalypse: America's Role in a World Transformed, *will be published this summer.*

AUSTEN IVEREIGH

On Papal Populism

Francis reflects on our political moment.

Pope Francis leads his weekly general audience from the library of the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican, January 13, 2021.

CNS PHOTO/VATICAN MEDIA

When the host of *The Late Show* asked Joe Biden just before Christmas how the second Catholic president of the United States would take his orders from the pope on how to govern, Biden didn't get the joke. "He personally called me to congratulate me," he told Stephen Colbert in all earnestness, adding that he had just been on the phone with the archbishop of Washington, Wilton Gregory, who told him that Francis had signed a book he wanted the president to have.

That book, which I helped put together, is called *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future*. It is Francis's reflection on the pandemic and the possibilities of change the crisis offers to humanity. It ends with a vision for a new kind of politics that seemed timely enough in the lead-up to the November 2020 election, against the background of Trump's campaign rallies and the Black Lives Matter protests. Now, after the "Jericho March" and the storming of the Capitol by Trump supporters on January 6, Francis's powerful critique of both Christian-nationalist populism and what he calls "technocratic managerialism" could not be more relevant.

Like the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, *Let Us Dream* opens up a space beyond the current polarization in Western politics. Francis is doing for our own era what Pius XI sought to do with his 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*—in another age of democratic crisis and authoritarian populism. Both urge us not to settle for the status quo, but to look to a different kind of politics, one that recognizes the human dignity of all people and builds society and the economy on that basis.

Although both of these encyclicals turn to the people, there is a great gulf separating their "inclusive populism," as Angus Ritchie calls it in a recent book of that name, and the exclusivist populism of hate and division fomented by Trump and other demagogues. Understanding that difference, and the contrasting spiritual movements involved, is vital if we are to find a way out of the current political crisis.

For Francis, the root of the crisis in liberal democracy is a neo-Darwin-

Francis points out that homeless people freezing to death behind empty hotels barely raises an eyebrow in comparison to the shock that greets a sharp fall in the stock market.

ist market ideology that treats people as commodities. In *Let Us Dream*, he points out that homeless people freezing to death behind empty hotels barely raises an eyebrow in comparison to the shock that greets a sharp fall in the stock market. Returning again to a medieval rabbi's interpretation of the Tower of Babel, in which bricks were considered more valuable than slaves, Francis points out that an economy obsessed with growth and consumption is essentially one of human sacrifice. "People or bricks," he says. "It's time to choose."

Francis understands the pain and political disillusionment behind the rise of populism, "the disjuncture between the awareness of social rights on the one hand and the distribution of actual opportunities on the other," as well as the anger of those "thrust aside by the ruthless juggernaut of globalized technocracy." Anger at the loss of opportunity and agency, a sense of displacement that leads people to cling to their identities—these provide fertile soil for authoritarian leaders willing to stoke fears and a sense of victimhood.

In *Let Us Dream*, Francis laments "the often cruel rhetoric of populist leaders denigrating the 'other' in order to defend a national or group identity." In remarks broadcast on Italian television on January 9, Francis said the attack on the U.S. Capitol showed that when people acted "against the community, against democracy, against the common good," it was a sign of the spiritual forces at stake. "Thank God this has erupted and we had a chance to see it well," he added, "because now you can try and heal it."

The spirit behind Trumpian populism is captured in Part II of *Let Us Dream*, which contains superb teaching on spiritual discernment: how we can detect what is of and what is opposed to God, unmasking the bad spirit when it appears *sub angelo lucis*—disguised as an angel of light. Christian nationalism is full of appeals to the good and to God, to Jesus and to righteousness, but its real spirit is easy to detect. It exploits fears and suspicions, blames others, and rubs salt in the wounds of grievance. It polarizes and divides the world into us (good) and them (bad), "closing us in on our own interests and viewpoints by means of suspicion and supposition."

Francis describes this spirit of opposition to the common good and to unity as the "isolated conscience," a temptation that leads to a sense of alienated superiority from the body (in this case, from democratic society) and turns people into "beleaguered, complaining selves who disdain others, believing that we alone know the truth." There can be few better descriptions of the mob Trump sent to the Capitol than this—people full of angry self-righteousness and a sense of betrayal, spouting bizarre claims of stolen elections and claiming divine sanction for their actions. ("When God gives you a vision, you don't need to know anything else," said the emcee of the Jericho March, Eric Metaxas.)

At the root of the isolated conscience, says Francis, there is always what St. Ignatius of Loyola called an "acquired fortune" (*cosa adquisita*), or some sense of entitlement or privilege. The fear of losing this acquired fortune leads people to cling more tightly to it, while "the spirit of suspicion and supposition supplies reasons to hold back, concealing my attachments while justifying them through the faults of others," writes Francis. Those in the grip of this spirit can come to believe almost anything they are told by people who share their grievance, and distrust evidence or argument advanced by those they see as enemies. Hence "Stop the Steal."

In the nakedly racist, grievance-filled discourse of Trump and his mob, in the guns and Confederate flags they carried, the "acquired fortune" is in plain view: it is the mythology of the Lost Cause, the Christian nationalist myth of the South as the preserver of American exceptionalism and moral superiority. All this is tied up with a sense of victimhood and betrayal to which Trump's MAGA rhetoric appeals. Building a wall to keep out "Mexicans," storming the Capitol to overturn a "stolen" election he lost—Trump stokes the grievances and superiority of isolated conscience like no other, oblivious to any notion of the common good or fraternity.

If Jonah is the Biblical icon of the isolated conscience, says Francis, then Zacchaeus—the diminutive tax collector changed by God's mercy—is the great Scriptural example of one who renounces his isolation to serve the people. The catalyst of his transformation is his response to Christ: rather than accuse others, he accuses himself. Humility, as Francis says, is the antidote to the isolated conscience. In lowering ourselves—in relation not to others, but out of awe for God—we make room for the good spirit to act in us. Then, "rather than find fault in my brother or sister, I see in him or her one who is also struggling, and in need of help, and I offer myself in service to them."

Humility is the basis of the fraternity envisioned in *Fratelli tutti*. We see

it in the parable of the Good Samaritan, whose identity is not threatened by a fellow human in need. The kind of political conscience the pope is calling for reflects that attention to the needs of others, whatever their allegiances, and a willingness to organize our economy in a way that will meet those needs.

It is a way of doing politics that stays above the fray of polarization, aware of the contagious power of accusation. Rather than feeding this beast, it allows it to reveal itself and wither—much as Biden has done in response to Trump. "Like coronavirus, if the virus of polarization cannot transfer from host to host, it gradually disappears," Francis observes.

But the pope does not want us to run away from conflict. Part II of *Let Us Dream* describes a dynamic, God-created reality filled with forces that pull against each other and tensions that demand resolution, which the pope calls "living polarities" or "contrapositions."

Such tensions—between what is and what should be, between different views and interests—are the stuff of politics. To flee from them, seeking peace at any price, means refusing to accept reality. But what is diabolic is the attempt to exploit these tensions by turning them into contradictions, reducing complicated realities to simple binaries (e.g. the people versus enemies of the people), and demanding that we choose one side to defeat the other.

Francis calls instead for us to "endure" the tension of difference, facing it head on and opening those involved to a new way of seeing that preserves what is good in each side while transcending both. Such breakthroughs come about "as a gift in dialogue, when people trust each other and humbly seek the good together," he says.

This is just one dimension of a politics of service, one that isn't just about managing the apparatus of the state and campaigning for reelection, but which cultivates virtue and forges bonds. This "Politics with a capital P," as he calls it, is "a vocation above all for those disturbed by the state of society," for those who "burn with the mission" to secure for their people access to land, labor, and lodging. Such politicians—or community leaders—"carry with them the smell of the neighborhoods they serve." They are men and women of compassion who respect the culture and dignity of those they represent.

Here lies the crucial element in the regeneration of politics the pope is calling for. As in *Laudato si'*, in *Let Us Dream* Francis has much to say about the need for government to set new goals for the economy beyond the relentless pursuit of growth, policies that expand access to work and protect the planet. There is much for government to do. Yet the radicalism of this papal politics lies in the faith it puts in popular movements to challenge and shape what government does. "In the post-Covid world," he says, "neither technocratic managerialism nor populism will suffice. Only a politics rooted in the people, open to the people's own organization, will be able to change the future."

In 1931, faced with the polarization of liberalism and collectivism in an age of democratic collapse, Pius XI also called for the regeneration of civil society from below, for "the institutions themselves of peoples and, particularly those of all social life" to underpin "a juridical and social order which will, as it were, give form and shape to all economic life" (*Quadragesimo anno*). But no pope before Francis has put so much emphasis on what he calls the "people's movements" made up of those on the margins.

In Part III of *Let Us Dream*, he writes of social movements with roots in schools and parishes in poor neighborhoods that help people organize for living wages, safe streets, and dignified housing. In the United States, this is called broad-based or faith-based community organizing, of the sort promoted and funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD). The pope himself has hosted and encouraged meetings of these "popular movements" in Rome and elsewhere, and calls for the Church to "open its doors" to them—not to lead or control them, but to accompany and encourage them. This, he says, is the opposite of the way elites think, which he mocks as "all *for* the people but never *with* the people."

Recalling his own involvement with such movements in Buenos Aires—especially the *cartoneros*, or cardboard collectors—Francis describes celebrating a huge outdoor Mass each year in one of the city's big squares, which over time became a gathering place for thousands of excluded people. The people came "to ask God for the things they needed," putting him in mind of the crowd that followed Jesus, "not a mass of individuals hypnotized by some deft orator, but a people with a history, with a hope, who safeguarded a promise."

The crowd in the Gospel followed Jesus, says Francis, because his preaching evoked in them the awareness they carried in their guts of God's closeness and their own dignity. Francis saw in the crowds in Plaza Constitución, and in the popular movements, the same spirit. "In mobilizing for change, in their search for dignity, I see a source of moral energy, a reserve of civic passion, capable of revitalizing our democracy and reorienting the economy," he writes. This is a politics that turns to the people, not to rub salt in their wounds but to help them recover the dignity that is theirs; that sees the outcast not as a weapon but as a resource; that comes not to impose, but to serve; that does not divide from above, but builds unity from below. It is the politics we sorely need.

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A Dangerous Confusion

David Cloutier

What pro-life critics of the COVID vaccines get wrong

On December 14, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a response to a question that many Catholics had recently been asking: Is it permissible to get vaccinated for COVID-19 if the development of the vaccine involved cell lines derived from aborted fetuses? The USCCB's answer was that the use of such "morally compromised cell lines" was a form of material cooperation with evil. While it would be better to develop vaccines that do *not* involve these cell lines in any way, the bishops concluded that it is nevertheless permissible to use the current vaccines, given that the cooperation with evil is remote and that the benefits of vaccination are so great.

The USCCB's statement faced an immediate blowback in some pro-life circles, and several bishops signed an open letter lamenting that "the acceptance of these vaccines by Catholics, on the grounds that they involve only a 'remote, passive and material cooperation' with evil, would play into the hands of the Church's enemies and weaken her as the last stronghold against the evil of abortion." The letter even argued that the rush to vaccinate demonstrated that "our society has created a substitute religion: health has been made the highest good, a substitute god to whom sacrifices must be offered—in this case, through a vaccine based on the death of another human life." The letter ended with a claim to the *sensus fidei*, describing the "almost instinctual" reaction against the vaccines among laypeople with whom these bishops had spoken.

Catholic moral theology does not usually give much weight to "instinctual" reactions, and for good reason. They are sometimes based on bad information. In this case, it quickly became clear that many in pro-life circles did not actually understand what exactly the connection to abortion was. The open letter spoke of one's own "body" benefiting from the "fruits" of this "concatenation" with the "abortion industry." It encouraged the lurid idea that, as one well-known pro-life commentator put it, the bishops were allowing "our children to be injected with these vaccines that have dead children in them." Such sensationalistic language implies that all the talk about "remoteness" is just a smokescreen for a moral abomination.

Happily, the USCCB's own analysis eschews such sensationalism. It soberly recognizes the importance of vaccination for our whole society, as does the subsequent instruction issued by the Vatican on December 21. Still, many readers of *Commonweal* might find the USCCB document excessively cautious and the later Vatican document even more so. It might seem obvious that the benefits of a COVID vaccine outweigh any concerns about the use of "cell lines of illicit origin," as the bishops call them. But what if the cells used had come from the HeLa line, the first "immortal" cell line still used for much research, obtained by Johns Hopkins in the 1950s from a young female African-American cancer patient without her consent?

The vaccine controversy raises the larger question of how to evaluate the present use of benefits derived from past evils. This is a difficult question that many people want to make too easy. They perform utilitarian calculations when they are less concerned with a past evil, and demand maximum moral purity when they are more concerned. The USCCB, to its credit, speaks out of the rich Catholic tradition of reflection on these knotty questions. But its approach also raises some questions about that tradition's viability in light of the whole range of grave historic wrongs on which our lives are built, from slavery to abortion.

Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski of Miami receives the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine on December 16, 2020.

CNS PHOTO/TOM TRACY

Picking up on *Dignitas Personae*, a 2008 document issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the USCCB and Vatican statements on vaccination use the framework of cooperation with evil. The traditional casuistry related to this idea assumes that one's action contributes, either formally or materially, to the evil action of another. What's called "formal cooperation" involves sharing the evil actor's intent. Think, for example, of an accomplice to a conspirator who supports the conspiracy by keeping its secrets. This is always wrong, as should be obvious. The real difficulties come under the heading of "material" cooperation, such as the classic case of the cab driver who is asked to take a fare to the address of a well-known brothel. This, too, is to be avoided, but there can be many good reasons to accept material cooperation in some cases, not least because there are so many differently positioned cooperators. The sheer scale and complexity of large social structures can make judgments about material cooperation very difficult, but writers such as Julie Hanlon Rubio and Daniel Finn have attempted to develop the concept especially in terms of our agency as consumers. They (and I) are convinced that Catholics must still ask serious questions about sins of material cooperation when making individual choices, even in very large and apparently impersonal economic and political systems.

You might wonder, what exactly is the material cooperation in the case of the new COVID vaccines? At its best, Catholic moral analysis relies on accurate descriptions of acts; and the act in question here is receiving a vaccine whose development made use of cell lines of illicit origin. Note that the USCCB letter is evaluating *not* the act of abortion, *nor* the use of cells taken from fetal tissue, *nor* the vaccines that include such cells, but rather vaccines whose process of production or testing includes the use of cells taken from a cell line (HEK-293) that is virtually ubiquitous in basic medical research. The cells used to start this line back in the 1970s were taken from an aborted fetus.

Readers may already sense the awkwardness of using the term "cooperation" in a case like this. What we are really talking about is *appropriation* of the fruits of an evil act. In a scholarly article published twenty years ago, Cathleen Kaveny pointed out that attempts to force instances of appropriation into the framework of cooperation often end up getting things backward. This is because, in cases of appropriation, you are not helping the evildoer; it is the evildoer who is (unintentionally) helping you.

The two main approaches to the problem of appropriation—one a demand for an unrealizable purity, the other a cold-blooded utilitarian calculation of results—both seem inadequate in light of a key fact: *the past is past*; what's done cannot be undone. To take an example of continuing importance in this country, there is no way for Americans to "make up" for slavery, and no way to sever the chains of causation that still link us to that abominable institution. The same thing is true about an awful lot of medical and biological knowledge. I recently read Bill Bryson's *The Body*, and I was struck by how much basic medical knowledge and how many medical procedures were developed in ways that would horrify us now.

We need a better framework for dealing with problems of appropriation. Consider two places where the USCCB's analysis falls short because it relies on the existing tools designed for evaluating cooperation with evil. First, in a key passage, the bishops say "it is important to note" that its examples of "morally-compromised vaccines" do not in fact rely on *any* new abortions, or create any demand for them. Quite the contrary:

HEK-293, the "immortal" cell line used in the development of the COVID-19 vaccines, lasts indefinitely, and experimenters often prefer using familiar, often-deployed materials to make it easier to compare results. If anything, HEK-293's ubiquity in basic research likely forestalls the development of newer cell lines. Yet, while the document says this is "important to note," it does not say *why* it is important to note, and it goes on to analyze the use of these cell lines as "morally compromised." Readers are left with the impression that the cell lines are themselves still somehow tainted by abortion, but what does that mean? On exactly what grounds is some material labeled "morally compromised"?

This quasi-physicalist suggestion of a tainted object is amplified by a second aspect of the USSCB's analysis: an apparent moral distinction between, on the one hand, the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines and, on the other, the vaccine developed by AstraZeneca. What is this distinction? As indicated in a chart widely circulated by the Lozier Institute, the first two (mRNA) vaccines do not use HEK-293 cells in their *design* and *production*, only for *testing*. The AstraZeneca vaccine, by contrast, requires the use of HEK-293 cells in all phases of its development. The USSCB statement explicitly states that the first two vaccines are therefore morally preferable, but then, acknowledging that many people may not be able to choose which vaccine they get, the statement goes on to encourage Catholics to get the AstraZeneca vaccine if that's the only one available to them.

This analysis risks causing unnecessary confusion among the faithful, not least by fostering the idea that the vaccines themselves are *measurably* tainted—an idea that plays into the hands of the zealots. Is there really a *morally significant* difference here? Isn't it the case that using the cells is either "morally compromising" or not? It's as if the moral stain is greater in one case than in the others simply because there is more cooperation, as "measured" by the Lozier chart. In typical cases of cooperation, attempts to distinguish between alternatives would prompt closer attention to a variety of characteristics linking the cooperator with the evil act. But the distinctions the bishops are making seem encouraged by the Consumer Reports quality of the Lozier Institute chart, which uses red and green indicators in various boxes, thereby reducing the moral analysis to a kind of checklist. To be fair to the Institute, the chart provides accurate and valuable information about the various vaccines, but the color-coding approach suggests that morality is a matter of evaluating *products*, when it's really about evaluating intelligible *actions*.

While the new Vatican document does not propose moral comparisons among the various COVID-19 vaccines, its use of the ill-fitting category of cooperation manifests a different problem: it encourages the idea that conscientious objectors to vaccination are morally heroic. After all, while "remote material cooperation" can be permissible, it is never *preferable* if there are legitimate ways to avoid it. Their document states that vaccination "is not, as a rule, morally obligatory" and "must be voluntary," and so goes on to say those who "for reasons of conscience, refuse vaccines" must take alternative measures (masks, etc.) to protect the common good. Apart from the misleading suggestion that prophylactic measures like mask-wearing are of comparable effectiveness with vaccination, such a statement is too easily understood as honoring the conscientious objectors as though they offered a heroic witness to the sanctity of life. As Fr. Matthew P. Schneider, LC, argued in a recent piece published by Patheos, Catholics looking for heroic ways to resist evil have more obvious and much less dangerous options. The pope himself has indicated he is preparing to receive the vaccine, and said in an interview that to do so is "an ethical duty."

So how should we discuss the morality of appropriation? In my view, the primary question should be about perpetuation. Like many classic cases of cooperation, a moral responsibility to avoid appropriation should recognize that one's choices can *perpetuate*—however minimally, remotely, or unintentionally—the evil acts of others. That is, there is a real sense in which one's action may facilitate an ongoing injustice. Indeed, this concern about perpetuation drives the earlier Vatican instruction *Dignitas Personae*, which the USCCB document relies on heavily. While the document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith did discuss cell lines originating from aborted fetal tissue, it's important to remember that the main context was the intense debate over embryonic stem-cell research in the 2000s. The CDF's eye was on "cells of illicit origins" because of the considerable pressure to produce and dismember embryos whose stem cells, we were told, would produce countless scientific breakthroughs. The CDF was rightly suspicious of this claim. In the key paragraphs thirty-five and thirty-six, *Dignitas Personae* condemns all destruction of embryos, as well as the supposedly innocent "material cooperation" that occurs when one "independent" institution creates and destroys the embryos, and then dispenses the "material" to another institution for research.

It is obvious that any activity along these lines would create an ongoing demand for harvested human tissue. And there are real pressures in the scientific world to do experiments and develop products that rely on a steady supply of fetal tissue. Catholics should always stand up against the routine "production" and use of human tissue in experimentation. But these important concerns simply do not apply to the COVID vaccines. Pro-life advocates should focus on the real problems and not get distracted by condemning new life-saving vaccines that have nothing to do with the perpetuation of abortion.

Yet even if the perpetuation of an evil should be the *main* worry about appropriation, it shouldn't be the only one. Both the USCCB and their critics raise the traditional concern with "giving scandal." (Here a brief aside may be in order: whatever the place of scandal in the Catholic moral tradition, the idea of the bishops worrying so much about it right now is pretty hard for many people to understand or stomach.) Having just lived through the Trump presidency, we might now have the perfect stock example of "giving scandal," together with a reminder of its abiding impor-

tance: those who supported Trump "gave scandal" by suggesting that his manifestly objectionable behavior was in fact not objectionable, thereby encouraging others to imitate him.

But it might be better to recall a biblical source of the concern for "scandal" that doesn't get enough attention: St. Paul's lengthy discussion of whether new Christians should eat meat sacrificed to idols—that is, the meat many would have had to eat at any distinguished social gathering. At the time, that was an ordinary and urgent practical problem for many converts. The argument in favor of eating the meat was simple enough. Christians know the idols are not real, so why not eat the food? Nevertheless, consuming such meat provoked thunderous accusations of idolatry against those who had thus "compromised." Paul does not go that route. In fact, he agrees that such meat is not actually "tainted" in any way, but brings up a different consideration. What about the weaker consciences of others, who might be more tempted to believe in idols? He concludes that it is more important to protect the conscience of others than to make use of one's own rights.

In this way, the concern expressed by the bishops and the CDF about the need to develop procedures and products that do not rely on the fruits of evil is not a matter of excess scrupulosity, but a recognition of what others might infer from such reliance. By using these cell lines without any moral reservations, we risk giving one of two impressions: either that past evils don't matter or that abortions are not grave evils. Both of these "give scandal," in the sense of giving encouragement to bad beliefs and behaviors.

But perhaps there is a better way of expressing this idea. In her article, Kaveny talks about the dangers of moral "seepage" and self-deception. We've recently seen these dangers on display in Trump-like attitudes among white Americans who think they have no moral responsibility for race relations because "they didn't own slaves," or insist that, in today's world, "race doesn't matter." A broader name for this problem might be "desensitization," especially as it relates to evils we're tired of hearing about. For all its therapeutic connotations, the term has great value in reminding us of a crucial fact: what becomes familiar to us is less and less able to shock us. I was reminded of this recently when, in a book about American history, I got to the chapters detailing westward expansion after the Civil War. These chapters included many wrenching accounts of the outright slaughter of Native Americans. Did I know that they had been treated brutally and repeatedly pushed off their land? Yes, of course; I had heard the story many times. But stumbling across the historical details of actual massacres made me realize that I'd become desensitized to this massive injustice.

A similar desensitization can and does happen with abortion in Catholic circles. The need to hold our new Catholic president accountable (somewhere other than at the altar rail, perhaps) for supporting increasingly extreme abortion language and policies is something a lot of Catholics would rather not think or talk about. Many Catholics rightly call for a "consistent ethic of life," but overlook the fact that routine abortion protected by law—not as an exceptional case, but as a basic human right—is such a large-scale contradiction of that ethic. Complaints that other Catholics spend too much time talking about abortion seem to indicate a worrying desensitization to the problem. Just as some people don't want to hear about slavery or the genocide of Native Americans because, they say, "it all happened a long time ago," so others don't want to hear about abortion because, they say, it's always happened—in every age and place. But abortion remains a grave moral evil, and we should not let ourselves forget that the development of these new vaccines—and an awful lot of other basic science—depend on the taking of a nascent life more than fifty years ago.

In light of all that, should Catholics have any moral qualms about the COVID vaccines? I sympathize with the bishops; it's hard to answer this question well, because people want to oversimplify it. Two other questions might be better ones. Do the vaccines present any problems traditionally associated with cooperation? I agree with other impeccably pro-life commentators who say there is really no problem with any of the vaccines, since the use of HEK-293 does not involve any perpetuation of abortion. If anyone's giving scandal here, it's the pro-lifers who recklessly disregard not only the bishops but also, much more importantly, the great goods to be achieved by widespread vaccination. Associating opposition to abortion with opposition to vaccines on the basis of bad moral reasoning risks leading many to dismiss the whole cause.

And yet one should still ask a second question: Don't the vaccines somehow bear the stain of individual and social sin? As with so many other things in our society, the answer is definitely yes—and we must guard against any tendency this choice might have to desensitize us to the ongoing injustice of abortion. But the idea that this is the moment for a heroic pro-life witness that will drive HEK-293 out of everyday use seems like an enormous misdirection of moral energy. Instead of arguing over a marginal case of past appropriation, perhaps we can learn something from this that will apply more generally to any appropriation of benefits that derive, however remotely, from evil actions: when it comes to past injustices, we are all sinners. We should never forget this. But neither should we get stuck on undoing past sins in a frenzy of impossible purification. Our most important duty is to act consistently to fight injustice here and now, wherever we find it. When faced with so much past evil, we should wake up every day and first hear the words, "Go, and sin no more."

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All Will Be Well

Denys Turner

Julian of Norwich, David Hume, and the problem of evil

The following essay first appeared on Commonweal*'s website in April 2017, but never in print. The magazine was then about twice as frequent and half as long as it is today, and the editors decided that an essay of such length, whatever its merits, would take up too much space. Nor could it be abridged without injury to its argument. We hoped readers who would appreciate such an essay would find it online, and some did. But recent events have reminded us that the question Denys Turner addresses here—how can a good and all-powerful God permit so much suffering and evil?—remains urgently important to all Christians in every time and place, but rarely more so than here and now, in the midst of plague, sudden poverty, and civil strife. It occurred to us that this would therefore be a good time to finally print Turner's rich and challenging essay, which does justice to the question of theodicy without proposing a full answer to it.*

The man in Princeton asks his way to Columbia. "If I were you," he is unhelpfully told, "I wouldn't start from Princeton." Alas, if Princeton is where you are, you don't have that choice; you have to start from there willy-nilly. That is how it is with many problems, especially those of a philosophical sort. And so it is with the problem of evil: we must start where we are, in the thick of it.

Because we are in the thick of it, it can seem obvious that the starting point for the problem of evil cannot be God and God's omnipotent goodness—Augustine's starting point. No, the starting point must be with the manifest evil there is in the world, and with the problem of how a good God, who could prevent it, does not do so. This is the approach of the Scottish philosopher David Hume. When it is a matter of where to start in addressing the problem of evil, it seems that the boot is on the skeptical foot.

William Blake, *Job's Despair*, 1805

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There are of course categorical, non-skeptical views on either side as to where discussion about God and evil *ends*. Namely, either that, in the face of evident evils, a theistic answer cannot meet the conditions of certainty and proof, and must therefore be rejected; or, the evils done by human free agency being unavoidable, their occurrence can be no evidence against the goodness and power of God. But if we leave aside these categorical solutions, it can seem as though evil is a problem of fact for belief in God. It can seem as if faith in God can never convincingly explain away the world's evil, let alone justify it, so that it is from those evils that we must start. It was thus that in the late eighteenth century, David Hume formulated the classic statement of what we now call the "problem of evil." And that has been where, more or less, everyone has started ever since. "Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered," Hume writes in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. "Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then He is impotent. Is He able, but not willing? Then He is malevolent. Is He both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"

But skepticism, or at least agnosticism, should be allowed to cut the other way too. For if Hume is right and there is no defense of theism that could demonstrate consistency between the facts of evil and the power and goodness of God, it is also worth asking whether we are any better placed to formally demonstrate inconsistency between them. Maybe the provable absence of such a demonstration is all that theism needs. As far as I can see, in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* Hume makes no categorical case to the effect that God and evil are formally inconsistent, and his Epicurean questions, though skeptical, should not be understood as establishing some sort of proof of atheism on their own. This is because the drift of Hume's *Dialogues* is meant to show how it is impossible to settle those questions either way. That of course would not be a reason why we shouldn't "start from there"—that is, skeptically. Far from it. It may even lend credibility to the proposition that we should do so, if only in a dialectical spirit and with a view to showing that the matter is unresolvable. Such a conclusion would at least cohere with the generally Pyrrhonian form of skepticism that Hume so often declared himself to favor: as he puts it (in the mouth of Philo, the most Humean of the dialogue partners in *Dialogues*) "a total suspense of judgment is our only reasonable resource."

So in this article, I want to put forward the case for starting where Hume starts, but go a little further than he does

It is distressing that lions seem as unlikely as ever to get round to lying down with lambs, but I cannot be troubled about God because they don't.

to argue that the reasons for doing so are not just tactical, apologetic, and dialectical, but ought to be accepted by theists too—and for good theological reasons of their own. At no point will I attempt to answer directly the question of how God could allow moral evil of any kind, let alone allow the extent of moral evil there is; we cannot prove any answer to that question one way or the other. In short, the matter is demonstrably undecidable—you can prove that you couldn't know the answer to it. That is about as far as anyone, theist or atheist, can get with the problem of evil. To the question "How could an all good and all powerful God allow evil?", the only answer is that it is impossible to say. And it is here that Julian of Norwich comes into the picture.

God and natural evil: Hume's problem

How far may we go along with Hume? Every evil is a problem of some kind, if only a practical problem of how to cope with it. But I do not agree with Hume that every evil is a problem about God. For some evils we can take in our stride, there being no cause for theological, philosophical, or even moral alarm therein, even though they offend our sentiments. So we should start by taking the existence of such evils out of the debate.

For example: I know that others (including my wife) have different convictions than I do about the matter, but I have personally never had a theological problem with lions eating antelopes, though it is impossible not to feel sorry for the panicking beasts as they flee their predators in such wonderfully graceful leaps and bounds. Of course it is distressing that lions seem as unlikely as ever to get round to lying down with lambs, as Isaiah had hoped they would, but I cannot be troubled about God because they don't. Lions lying down with lambs would of course be good news for lambs, but it would be terrible news for lions. Eating lambs goes with being a lion; being a lamb-eating machine is more or less what a lion is. And more generally nature seems to *require* a level of raw indifference in matters of tooth and claw. If there is to be variety and complexity in the natural world we know, including large carnivorous cats, the lambs, alas, are going to have to pay for it with their lives. "Did he who made the lamb make thee?" asks William Blake of the tiger burning bright. The question is rhetorical and the answer is yes: God did make tigers, and consistency would require of those who have a problem of this kind that they consider what alternative world they have in mind that doesn't replace a problem for lambs being eaten with a problem for carnivores being starved for want of ovine nutrition.

David Hume

ALLAN RAMSAY, 1766/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

It would appear to be the same with inanimate physical processes, for they sometimes impact unhappily, even tragically, upon human affairs. In the mid-eighteenth century, an earthquake in Portugal killed thirty thousand people, and Voltaire lost faith in God. More understandable would have been a loss of faith in human beings. It was they, after all, who had built Lisbon on a geological fault line and seemed willing to blame anyone or anything but their ignorance for the destructive outcome. We today have far less excuse for continuing to build San Francisco on the San Andreas fault line, and there seems to be something of a premodern and merely pagan superstition in supposing there would be a problem about God if someday soon San Francisco were to disappear forever down an immense sinkhole, for we do know now that the prospects are high that in due course it will.

And were it asked more generally why a good God who had alternatives available to him would create a world in which earthquakes are bound to happen, it is unclear what answer would meet the case either way. It would seem that in asking that sort of question about earthquakes we are asking about sets of physical processes governed by laws that originate at a point in time in the order of 1 to

the power of -37 seconds after the Big Bang. So to require God to have created only an earthquake-free world, and to regret that he didn't, is to regret too much, for to wish away earthquakes is to wish away the physical laws that govern the universe itself. There is no picking the good bits out of physics and leaving the bad, for that isn't physics at all. For obviously if God makes a world in which there are going to be predictable outcomes, that will be because God wants us to be able to understand that world. But the world would become wholly incomprehensible to us if we could never know when physical laws were going to be suspended by God just to suit our particular preferences from time to time. There *are* those physical laws precisely so that, by getting to know them, we can learn to avoid building cities where earthquakes are bound to happen.

More challenging for some is the problem of physical pain. Hume, again, took the lead here. He seemed to think it obvious that a world in which no one suffers physical pain would be a better world than the one we have. He asked why, if God is good, he should have chosen an alternative so obviously the worse of the two. "It seems…plainly possible to carry on the business of life without any pain," Philo says. Hume's skeptical musings are rarely so thoughtless as when he speculates in this way, and there is a quick and sharp retort forthcoming from anyone suffering from that rare genetic disorder known as CIPA, the chronic inability to feel pain. Hume might be less convinced of the advantages of a pain-free life had he given a moment's thought to the tragedy of a life threatened by scaldings in overheated bath water you cannot feel, by walking on a broken leg of which you are unaware, or walking in bare feet on broken glass without noticing, or having your hand in the middle of a flame without any painful sensation to tell you of your limb's destruction. Then he might not have been so easily convinced that bodily pain is altogether a bad thing, and he would hardly think that, overall, he was much better off for the want of it.

But then, as if acknowledging that *some* pain has its purpose in animal life and conceding the general principle that some pain may be necessary, Hume presses the point: Why, he asks, *so much* pain? Why *unbearable* pain? Would not tolerable pain—or even some reduction in pleasure—serve the purpose of sending out the signals needed to warn of life-threatening courses of action? To which there is some sort of answer in the thought that pain cannot serve its purpose within the economy of human life if it occurs only at tolerable levels of mild discomfort. For, when tolerable, pain loses its point. It fails to do its job if it is less than too much, and it would be still less effective if it were replaced by a simple reduction in one sort of pleasure relative to others. Of course, it does not follow from this that we should not try to reduce the levels of pain that visit us. Of course we should, but only as far as it is safe to do so. A world in which analgesics were used to dull all pain to acceptable levels of discomfort would be a world in which, our bodies no longer serving with biological efficiency to warn us, we would always have to calculate how to avoid physically harmful forms of behavior. Pain makes for an immensely more efficient warning device than sluggish brainpower with its capacities for self-deception.

None of these forms of evil—if indeed that is what they are—have any tendency to pose a problem of the kind that Hume thinks we are all forced to face. You can guarantee safety for lambs only on the condition of wimpishly vegetarian tigers and lions. You can have an earthquake-free cosmos only on the condition that there are no reliable physical laws to govern it. You can have a world free of physical pain only if it is also a world free of physical pleasure—in short, only if it is a world without nervous systems, which is to say, without bodies. Given the kind of world fit for bodies that we have, these pains are necessary evils where they are not necessary goods. And so it is hard to see why the existence of them is regarded as providing rational evidence against God. Indeed, they seem just as plausibly to be evidence for a providential benevolence within creation.

In any case, there is no need to bring God into the picture at this level, and it is no part of my argument that one should, since evolution will do as a perfectly good explanation for the emergence of the species we have, both lions and lambs, and for the fact that we animals all have diets disadvantageous to some other living species, and nervous systems that register pain. But if, like Hume and some fundamentalist Christians of our own time, you insist on bringing God into it one way or the other, the evidence from the natural world points at least as strongly against a skeptical conclusion as in favor of it. Ours seems to be just the sort of natural world you might expect a good and wise God would bring about, were God to bring about any world at all.

God and moral evil: Hume's problem

But as for moral evil, for "evil done," that would seem to be a very different matter. Here, at least, we might reasonably think that you have to start in Princeton—that is, with where we actually are. For here there really is a problem, and Hume gets halfway to an answer. He manages to show that

Julian of Norwich herself, at the age of eight or nine, had survived the Black Death, which in the space of two years took the lives of one third of the population of England.

there is no way of formally proving even the *de facto* consistency, nevermind the truth, of the three-way conjunction: God is all good, willing no evil; he is all powerful, hence able to prevent any evil; and yet there is evil. Hume says that the consistency of conjunction is logically possible, but that all the evidence of experience argues against it: "I will allow," he writes:

> that pain or misery in man is *compatible* with infinite power and goodness in the deity…[but] what are you advanced by all these concessions? A mere possible compatibility is not sufficient. You must prove these pure, unmixed and uncontrollable attributes from the present mixed and confused phenomena, and from these alone.

"A hopeful undertaking!" Philo adds ironically. "Here *I* triumph." For it is not Philo's job—or, we may suppose, Hume's—to demonstrate formal inconsistency between theistic belief and moral experience. It is rather his purpose, he says, only to show that it is for the second of the three participants in the *Dialogues*, Cleanthes, who thinks he can pull off the theistic trick and solve the riddle of evil, to "tug the labouring oar, and to support [his] philosophical subtleties against the dictates of plain reason and experience." Hume thinks he has shown that none of Cleanthes's arguments hold. For Hume there just *is* a problem of evil—anyone who is not a philosopher with an ax to grind can see that—and Philo challenges Cleanthes to make the case for God that, in face of the manifest evils of life, seems quite counterintuitive. If he cannot do that, then like it or not he will have no choice but to start with Philo from Princeton. I am not sure this makes Hume an atheist. For certain it makes him a Pyrrhonian skeptic.

God and moral evil: Julian of Norwich's problem

Let us leave Hume there for the moment, because I now want to draw attention to a surprisingly different time, place, and style of reflection on the problem of evil—that of the fourteenth-century English theologian Julian of Norwich. Unlike Hume she believes categorically in the existence of a good and all-powerful God. That said, she shares one thing with him: she is quite baffled at the quandary that is caused by the quantity and viciousness of sin. What's more, just as Hume refuses to eliminate the problem by way of atheism, so Julian refuses to dissolve the problem by way of theology. She confesses that she does not know why a good and almighty God should have created a world in which there is evil. You might find the parallel between this fourteenth-century woman recluse and the worldly Scottish enlightenment skeptic to be surprising and unlikely. But setting Hume and Julian alongside one another may, I hope, shed some light on a distinction that is hard to grasp and often misunderstood. This is the distinction between a Pyrrhonian skeptic like Hume, for whom it cannot be known whether there is an answer to the problem of evil at all, and a theologian of the apophatic persuasion like Julian, for whom there *is* an answer, although it is unknowable. Both claim not to know, but their differences show that not-knowing can come in very different kinds.

Julian's book of her "showings," as she calls them, is an extended set of meditations on a central problem that besets her: she is profoundly troubled by her experience of evil, especially that consciously evil human behavior that she calls generically "sin." And who would not be after reflecting on conditions in what must be the second nastiest century after our own, ravaged as it was by disease, death, war, poverty, malnutrition, starvation, and economic decline? Julian herself, at the age of eight or nine, had survived the Black Death, which in the space of two years took the lives of one third of the population of England. And in the face of her experience of the reality of evil—physical, social, and moral—she is told in her showings that God does not see sin, that for God sin is "no thing," and that, contrary to all her own experience of human sinfulness, "all will be well, and all will be well, and every manner of thing will be well" (*A Revelation of Love*, chapter 27).

Julian is therefore confronted with a dilemma: the conjunction of her own intensely painful experience of sin (she says we experience it as "sharp pain") and of the assurance that God does not notice sin compels her to seek some intellectual space within which the two conflicting propositions might be reconciled. You cannot sweep away the evil with some gesture toward the compensating goodness of God. Sin, she says, is real and inexplicable: it may be the source of—or may consist in—all sorts of illusions about ourselves, our fellow human beings, indeed about God. It may be the reason we fail to relate to others and ourselves as we should. But there is no sort of unreality in the fact of our failing to relate properly. The complex reality is that, on account of the world's sin, unreality is the medium of our realities, of our actual relationships. This condition is the meaning of what Julian and Christians generally call the "fall." And so the question that dominates her reflections is simple, and, remarkably, it is none other than Philo's. Why, given a God who is omnipotent and all good, is there sin at all? For Julian as for Hume, it is a question that demands that she hold on to

the dilemma without eliminating one of its horns. The omnipotent and unfailing love of God and the existence of sin are both undeniable. How, asks Julian, if we cannot deny either, can we assert both and hold the two in tension? There is sin. But why?

It is worth noting why this question seems so important to Julian and so odd to many of the philosophers and theologians of our own time. For the assumption equally widespread among both philosophers and theologians today is that the one thing for which you *don't* need an explanation is that sin happens and is bound to. It seems to them, as it did to Hume, too obvious to be worth debating that if you create a world of free agents, where freedom must at least allow for the choice between good and evil actions, then *necessarily* some evil choices are going to be made. A world of completely free agents who never choose evil actions is certainly describable, but by strict logical necessity even an almighty God could not create one, since for God to cause a human world to be sinless would be for God to rob human choices of their freedom, it being assumed that no action of mine can be free if anything other than I is the cause of it. And that "anything other" includes God. So a world of sinless human beings is describable but uncreatable. In this view, Julian's question "Why is there sin?" is redundant. Such, for example, is the view of the Calvinist philosopher Alvin Plantinga.

But Julian insists: God *could* indeed have created a world of human beings in which no one freely chooses to sin. That difference shows there is a vast spiritual, as well as intellectual, chasm between Plantinga, who evidently thinks that the human will could be free only if it occupied a space evacuated of the divine causal agency, and Julian, for whom, as for Augustine and Aquinas, our free choices are precisely where the presence of God's agency is most evidently and directly working. You can see God acting *directly* in our free actions, for, precisely insofar as they are free, they are not subject to determination by natural causes, and so God's agency is not mediated by them. Therefore God's causality stands to my freedom *only* directly.

It is because Julian thinks God is the cause of our free choices that there is for her a real question as to why God did not create a world of free agents who freely choose not to sin. As Julian sees it, God could have done so. And so she tells us that

> I saw that nothing stood in my way but sin. And I saw that this was so for us all generally, and I thought: if there had been no sin we should all have been clean and like to the Lord who made us. And thus…I often wondered why by the great foresight and wisdom of God sin had

A sculpture of Julian of Norwich

CHRIS DORNEY/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

not been prevented. For then, I thought all should have been well.

Christian theologians, especially those who seek the escape route between the horns of Hume's dilemma that is known as the "free-will defense," should give serious thought to Julian's doubt here. One of the reasons Julian is too often presented as a cheerful and empty-headed goody-two-shoes in some pious Christian circles is that readers today fail to see how far she is from pursuing the escape route from the problem of sin available in the conventional "free-will" defense. For Julian to think—as Plantinga does—of God's causality as excluding my free will, in the same way that your jogging my elbow would exclude my spilling the tea voluntarily, is to misrepresent the nature of divine causality in its relation to human freedom. It is just to this point, if no further, that one can observe the parallel between Hume and Julian: both resist that way out of the problem of evil that resorts to excising one of the dilemma's horns. Unlike Plantinga, Julian sees no problem of consistency in maintaining that God could have created a world of free but sinless human beings; like Hume Julian will not let Plantinga get away with it. Julian therefore has the same problem as Hume: if God could have created a world without sin, should he not have done so, since such a world would have been the best possible world? And would you not suppose that a perfectly good and all-powerful God would, as a matter of course, make such, and only such, a world?

Is ours the best possible world?

At this point Julian is fully engaged in a sort of dialogical argument with the Lord about the matter—chapters 27–32 of her Long Text read like a sort of conversational disputed question in the academic mode of the medieval university—and it is a subtle one, requiring the sort of careful reading that it doesn't always get in the secondary literature of our time. It is true that the Lord rebukes Julian for her anxieties about sin, but what she thereupon corrects herself for having thought is not that God could have created a world of free human agents who did not sin. Instead, she corrects herself for assuming that all would have been well only in such a sinless world. Her inclinations on that subject, until corrected by the Lord, were the same as Hume's. They were also the same as those of the biblical Job. What the Lord tells her is that all is well *in just this sinful world*, and that puzzles her all the more: in recounting this episode in her "showings," Julian admits she had to be persuaded how what she is told could be true. For plainly this world of sin could not be the best possible world. And why, she asks, would God create a lesser good when a better, indeed best, world was available for the creating. But here her answer is, sensibly enough, that the question is falsely put. That's because nothing *could* answer the description "best possible world." There could no more be a best-possible world than there could be a best-possible sonnet or string quartet. Here again she agrees with Hume, who, attributing the view that ours is the best possible world to the great German philosopher Leibnitz, deemed it to be "bold and paradoxical," but otherwise would not entertain it.

Of course it might seem quite natural and obvious for a theist to respond that there must be a best-possible string quartet, perhaps imagining that there is the string quartet God would compose were he to compose one, and that God could not possibly compose a second-rate piece of music when he could create the unsurpassably good one. In fact, even were there such a piece of music as the best-possible string quartet, God could not be under any constraint to compose *only* it, because if God can compose only the best-possible string quartet, then there is something that Beethoven can do that God cannot. For while Beethoven could, and did, compose his String Quartet in C# Minor (Opus 131), it would follow on this account that God could not have composed it, since, good as it is, no one would say that Beethoven's Opus 131 is the best-*possible* string quartet. There is at least *possibly* a better one in the cards, one even better than whatever quartets Beethoven himself might have composed had he lived longer.

As it is with string quartets, so it is with worlds. In agreement with Thomas Aquinas, Julian does not think this is the best possible world. Like any medieval Christian believer, she thinks that a world in which everybody is totally free but of such a mind that sinning cannot come into the picture any more is not only possible but actual, because God has created exactly that state of affairs in creating the heaven that is offered to us after death. There we are guaranteed for all eternity to be utterly sinless and to be utterly free in our not sinning. So it is not on account of her disagreement with Plantinga that Julian is rebuked, because the Lord evidently agrees with her, not Plantinga, about his having the power to create a sinless world of free agents. Rather, she is rebuked for having supposed that "all manner of things (would be) well" *only* in such a sinless world.

The "behovely"

What Julian is told beyond that is a puzzle. She is told that in this world with all its sin, with all its "sharp pain," nothing is "amiss." In this world, sin

is "behovely." Here again Plantinga comes into the picture for a very particular reason having to do with a mistranslation of the word "behovely" in the older Penguin modernization of Julian's text by Clifton Wolters and even in the more scholarly Colledge and Walsh modernized version. "Sin is necessary" is how both these versions have it. This translation suggests that in a world of free agents there will *necessarily* be sin. That, however, is Plantinga's idea. It is *not* Julian's.

Why is it so egregiously wrong to translate "behovely" as "necessary"? Because it involves a misunderstanding of the nature of the theological predicament that Julian feels constrained to address. For, as we have seen, "necessary" is exactly what Julian thinks sin is not. That is why, believing that things could have been otherwise, she has a problem Plantinga does not have. She needs to take an entirely different theological tack.

"Necessary" won't do as a translation of "behovely" because "necessary" is a term forming a joint in a linear, inferential sequence: if *this* is the case, then *that* necessarily follows. Understanding sin as "necessary" would appear to be attractive to those for whom, maintaining that there could not be a creatable world without sin, a philosophical solution to the problem of evil is thereby made available. Because evil is necessary in any world that God can actually create, God can't help but that there is sin. But Julian thinks there is no such solution, and her approach to the problem of evil evokes a quite different vocabulary of explanation. Just as the logician's "if p, then q" is inferentially linear, so Julian's "it is behovely that there is sin" is narratival. "Behovely" is the connective tissue of a storyline, not of a syllogism.

As a rough translation into modern English, Julian's "behovely" means something like "fitting," or "befitting," implying that there is something that the behovely fits with and gets its sense from. Perhaps one could also translate it as "appropriate." Or, as I would prefer, one could translate "sin is behovely" as "sin is just so." To get closest to a distinctly medieval meaning of "behovely," the best way to translate it is not with a modern English word, but rather with a medieval Latin term of theological art—namely, *conveniens*. One way of getting a grip on the non-logical character of the term is from a standard medieval question: "Was the Incarnation necessary?"—to which the received answer, from the time of Anselm's late-eleventh-century treatise known as *Why did God become Man?* (*Cur Deus Homo*), was twofold. Absolutely speaking, the Incarnation was *not* necessary. God, after all, was under no necessity of nature, nor under any obligation in justice, to do anything at all about the sinful predicament of creatures; and, if he were to do anything about it, many possibilities of relieving that predicament were available to God other than the Incarnation—and all of them at lower cost. Yet the second person of the Trinity, the Word, was made flesh and dwelt among us. Why?

Duns Scotus said early in the fourteenth century that God became man not as a response required by an unanticipated event, nor as a solution to any kind of problem, at least not principally. Scotus thought that God just fancied the idea of becoming man regardless of whether Adam sinned or not. As Proverbs puts it, it was Wisdom's "delight to be with the children of men" (8:31). On the other hand, if God was under no constraint of necessity to become man, neither was the Incarnation a mere whim on the Father's part to send his Son into the world, to preach and suffer and die for the world's sake. If he was neither under any necessity to do so nor merely indulging his power to do it, then the question why God chose to set in motion just those particular events needs to be understood other than in terms of either logical or natural necessity. For the question "Why did such and such happen?" we need instead a vocabulary that is closer to how one explains an event's occurrence within a particular narrative—because you are explaining how the narrative makes sense of *just that* happening. And, as to the Incarnation, the term of art that, after Anselm, the medieval theologians used in answering the question "Why did God become man?" was that it was *conveniens*. It was not that it just so happened, as if by accident or on a whim. Nor was it a sort of Plan B, things having gone so terribly wrong with Plan A in the Garden of Eden. But though it wasn't a necessity imposed on God, it was indeed "just right" that God should do it, it was *conveniens*—"behovely," or perhaps "just the thing," a Godlike thing to settle on such an over-the-top solution. And you can get to see just how right it was if you can get the hang of the story it fits within. In short, *conveniens* in Latin, or "behovely" in Middle English, are terms descriptive not of how logical and linear sequences are formed, but rather of how narratival and spiral sequences are formed. It is a term descriptive of what is just right about a good story, such that if you are to understand why an event happened you need some access to the whole story in which it takes place.

Julian believed that sin so 'fits' with the divine plan that nothing can be 'amiss.' And this can seem implausible, even scandalously so.

Sin is behovely

The vocabulary of the *conveniens* or the "behovely" is, then, that of connective tissue for the spiral of a narrative that accumulates meanings as it goes

along and, as it accumulates those meanings, progressively demands the readjustment of the narrative curve. And no doubt some such notion of the "behovely" would provide an understanding of Julian's theology were we considering only her description of the Incarnation itself in those terms. For her, the coming of Christ could not have been anticipated had it not been prophesied. We needed to be told because no necessity entailed it. But when the Incarnation happens, everything becomes clear: we have a new hermeneutic of the Old Law, obscure poetry that seemed to mean one thing becomes a hermeneutical key for everything—one has only to think of how differently the prophecies of Isaiah or Hoseah read when they are read, after the fact, in light of the Incarnation. The role of the term "behovely" in Julian's theology would be perfectly clear and uncontroversial if she had merely been proposing the medieval commonplace that the Incarnation was in this way behovely.

But this is not all she says. What Julian calls behovely is "sin." So much for Julian as the cheerfully upbeat dispenser of piously optimistic nostrums. The problem of credibility that Julian's theology presents us with deserves to be faced squarely. Here we have a great theologian of the Christian Church telling us that sin is behovely. She tells us this not because she is naïve about the world's evil but because, knowing the world's evil for what it is, she believes that it follows from core Christian beliefs about God's power and love; that sin so "fits" with the divine plan that nothing can be "amiss." And this can seem implausible, even scandalously so. For we must suppose Julian's theology to entail that behovely—and so not amiss—was the bureaucratic, cold efficiency with which the murder of 6 million Jews was planned and executed; behovely, the ideologically motivated mass exterminations of the Pol Pot regime; behovely, the frenzied pogroms of Rwanda and the mass rapes of Syria; behovely, the betrayals of every adulterous spouse; behovely, every lie told in breach of trust; behovely, every sexual abuse of a child; behovely, every rich person's denial of food to the hungry. If these are not amiss, it would seem that *nothing* could be amiss. It would seem that Julian's response to the problem of evil is simply to deny, a priori and in the face of the overwhelming weight of evidence to the contrary, that there is any possible evil that could be a problem for belief in God.

It has to be admitted that at this point in the argument it is all too easy for the contemporary theologian to lose his or her nerve—and that is why the free-will defense of Plantinga and others can seem to be the only way out for believers. You take Plantinga's line in order not to be stuck with Julian's and because you feel weighed down by the heavy burden of human evil. If all you need to say is that evils of such incalculable extent and intensity can't be helped, that they wouldn't be sins if they weren't freely done, and that our *not* sinning would not be free if God had prevented it, then it's all our fault and you cannot blame God for sin. In this view, a world without sin would be without humans, occupied only by automata preprogrammed by God. A sinless world is impossible given freedom, and without freedom there are no human beings.

For Julian, such a conception of God and human freedom is not all right. Significantly, Julian's position is closer to that of most atheists of our times than it is to that of most contemporary Christian theologians, and I think it is closest of all to the skeptical Hume. In *The Nature of Necessity* (1974), Plantinga writes, "It was beyond the power of God himself to create a world containing moral good but no moral evil." Julian disagrees. God could have created such a world and did not. Then there is John Mackie, an atheist precisely on account of believing Julian to be right and Plantinga wrong: "God was not…faced with the choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong: there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right. Clearly [God's] failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good" ("Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind*, 63, no. 254) And here again is Julian, the fourteenth-century anchoress, sorely tempted to agree with Mackie: "And I thought that if sin had never existed, we should all have been pure and like himself, as God made us; and so in my folly I had often wondered before now, why, in his great forseeing wisdom, God had not prevented the beginning of sin; for then, I thought, all would have been well." What is clear, then, is that Julian would rather have Mackie's problem, with or without a solution, than be forced to conclude as Plantinga does, because the price of his conclusion would have to be paid in the currency of what a later age called "deism"—the doctrine of a God whose presence is expelled from that part of his creation that is most in his image and likeness: the human freedom of choice. Once again, Hume agrees: deism would be a way out, but Julian will have none of it, any more than will Demea in the *Dialogues*. Why, Demea asks, "should man pretend to an exemption from the lot of all other animals?"

So does Julian have a solution? She makes it every bit as clear as Hume does that neither she

nor anyone else is in possession of one. But there is a difference between the two, and it is all the difference in the world. Hume does not say that there is no solution to the problem of evil. He says only that whether there is or is not cannot be known, at least not by "natural reason." Julian, by contrast, knows that there is a solution, for "all manner of thing will be well," but she also knows that we do not and cannot know *how* that could be so. Therefore, how we are to understand Julian's skepticism in distinction from Hume's depends on how we are to understand her when at the very end of her Long Text—after perhaps many more than twenty years of turning the problem of sin over and around—she tells us that, though "this book was begun by God's gift and his grace," it "is not yet performed, as to my sighte."

Clearly, Julian does not mean by this that her *text* is unfinished. On the contrary, the statement that her work is incomplete is clearly intended as the appropriate and responsible conclusion to a theological treatise as carefully constructed as any in the fourteenth century. Nor does she mean that, though some theological progress has been made in the Long Text that she had not been able to make in her earlier, much shorter version, perhaps a third attempt at it might yield a text that is finally "performed," or complete—a text that once and for all answered the question of "How could a good God allow sin?" in the sense that John Milton seemed to think was required of a theologically satisfactory response. Milton thought he could construct a narrative of paradise lost and regained that *is* able to "justifie the ways of God to men" (*Paradise Lost*). Julian's text refuses completeness in Milton's sense, in which the occurrence and pervasiveness of sin is said to have been theologically "justified," for she thought no such justification of God's ways is possible for us in our time. In not providing one, Julian's text does not fail of completeness. In what sense, then, is her text not yet "performed"?

It is the "not yet" that matters here, the provisional. What is provisional is Julian's theological refusal of both the logical completeness of Plantinga, which would purport to demonstrate the formal consistency of an infinite love's creating just this sinful world, and the narrative completeness claimed by Milton, which would purport to finish the story that "justifies the wayes of God to men." For all her doubts about how it could be true, Julian accepts that "sin is behovely." But I think she knows enough about how the logic of the behovely works—as narratives do—to understand that we could see how sin is behovely only if we were in possession of the complete narrative that makes sense of it, and we are not. All we possess is but a narrative fragment, a torn-off corner of the manuscript of salvation history, and it tells Julian of nothing but the paradox of an innocent man judicially executed for a reason he too begs to know of, though he dies, as we will, the reason why denied us all. Somehow, Julian knows that the meaning of sin, its character as behovely, lies in that incomplete narrative of the Cross that is at the heart of her showings, a narrative whose incompleteness is necessary, for "not yet" belongs to the nature of human existence in time. It is thus that Julian's apophatic theology moves far away from the skeptical Pyrrhonian world of David Hume.

Julian, then, cannot complete her "book," for incompleteness is in the nature of the narrative spiral itself. It is not just sin's being behovely that is being told by that narrative, it is *we* who are being told by it. For Julian, this includes her own two attempts to grapple with that fragment of the narrative that is shown to her. In that fragment is the meaning of sin, but it is hidden from her—it is, she says, a "great secret" the meaning of which is withheld from us. Julian knows that her attempts to lay hold of the complete story are themselves but episodes within it. As the postmodernists of our times would have it, she is being read by the narratives she believes herself to be writing; she is being told by the narrative she twice attempts to tell. What would answer Julian's question "Why is there sin?" is the narrative completed, her "book… performed." And that *cannot* be done within history. For the completed narrative is, literally, the end of the story. And that, Julian knows, is the beatific vision, the price of which is death.

In the meantime, there is but the meantime, the "not yet." And Julian does her theology obedient to the temporality in which neither understanding nor living can yet be "completed." Julian is the theologian she is because she knows that all theological writing submits to a necessary condition of incompleteness, and like Hume she refuses an easygoing and peremptory ultimacy. For writing that is pretentiously "finished" is not theological; it is parody. It is Jeremy Bentham's "nonsense upon stilts," the ridiculous parading as the sublime. Julian's theology is truly spiral. It begins and ends where unending begins, as T. S. Eliot says. And maybe Eliot did get it right. At any rate, he got it from his reading of Julian.

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All we possess is a torn-off corner of the manuscript of salvation history, and it tells Julian of nothing but the paradox of an innocent man judicially executed for a reason he too begs to know of, though he dies, as we will, the reason why denied us all.

Mosaic with theatrical masks, Capitoline Museums, Rome

Going to Extremes

John Paul Rollert

What acting taught me about the limits of empathy

I had to buy a hatchet. A real one: the kind that you can use to cut a tree down or split open someone's face. That's what the scene called for, not a reenactment of George Washington standing beside a cherry tree, rueful and wee, but an unhinged husband, having fallen off the wagon, chasing his poor wife around the living room.

B.O'KANE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

The frantic pursuit is the climax of *Come Back, Little Sheba*, a largely forgotten play from the somewhat less forgotten playwright, William Inge. But I undertook the scene—complete with lurching, braying, and wildly swinging a blunted hatchet—as part of a different dénouement.

Exploring the art of acting was my attempt to remedy a failing of the first draft of my dissertation about the ethics of empathy. In its conclusion, I had grandly speculated on, but failed to actually explore, the outer limits of empathy. My advisors' criticism was well-taken, but it did present a dilemma: How do you investigate empathy when it involves behavior far outside your comfort zone?

It was a tricky matter—morally, methodologically, and mentally—and I was fortunate that the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago afforded me the intellectual latitude to resolve it. The program is known for resisting narrow disciplinary boundaries, and it had already given me the freedom to explore what figures from Adam Smith to Michel de Montaigne to Barack Obama have to teach us about empathy. My favorite study focused on William Shakespeare, the subject of a chapter I worked on under the guidance of one of my advisors, Harold Bloom. The chapter examined the time Shakespeare spent strutting and fretting his hours on the Elizabethan stage. The eighteenth-century literary critic Elizabeth Montagu had compared his talents as a playwright to the whirling dervish in the *Arabian Nights*, someone who could "throw his soul into the body of another man, feel all his sentiments, perform his functions, and fill his place." I speculated that he could do so, in large part, because as an actor he'd honed a capacity for what I called "radical empathy," an uncanny aptitude possessed by those actors who seem to dissolve into their roles whenever they step foot on stage.

The answer to my conundrum, it turns out, was already written into my work. I needed to explore the actor's craft and find out what it might teach me about the limits of empathy—and the toll that such an exploration might exact. It helped that I was living in Chicago, a city with the most vibrant theater scene this side of the Hudson (and the most ardent community of actors in the country). After a bit of research, I settled on the Artistic Home, an award-winning storefront theater and the city's premier acting studio for training students in the Meisner technique.

That approach to dramatic performance is named for Sanford Meisner, who instructed a remarkable array of actors and actresses, including Grace Kelly, Robert Duvall, Gregory Peck, and Diane Keaton, in addition to directors Sidney Lumet and John Frankenheimer and playwrights David Mamet and Arthur Miller. The success of Meisner's New York City–based Neighborhood Playhouse, where he served as the director of the acting department until his retirement in 1990, made him the most successful heir to the revolutionary reevaluation of the actor's craft begun by the Russian actor, director, and theoretician Konstantin Stanislavsky.

Stanislavky was the founder of the famed Moscow Art Theater, and he came of age when figures like Anton Chekhov were writing plays whose naturalism proved an awkward fit for the grand theatricality most actors then favored. Stanislavsky responded by shifting the attention of his pupils. Rather than emphasize the exterior elements of dramatic representation—an arched eyebrow, a graceful step, lucent syllables—Stanislavsky instructed them in what he called the "School of Experience," a series of exercises, often improvisational, that aimed to induce realistic behavior onstage rather than studied affectation. The latter approach he termed the "School of Representation," and even at its most accomplished, he claimed, it produced a kind of acting that "has beauty but no depth. It is effective rather than deep." Indeed, whatever an audience might gain from such vivid displays, they lost something far greater: "You marvel, but you don't believe."

For Stanislavsky, the test of an actor's art was ultimately quite simple: to be or not to be. Meisner described successful efforts at putting this method into practice as "living truthfully under imaginary circumstances." But Meisner focused on one element of the Stanislavsky System in particular, taken from *An Actor's Work*, the manual Stanislavsky modeled after the two-year conservatory he led, an element that was largely overlooked by other enthusiasts: communion.

Communion involves the relationship between the individual actors on stage and the elusive quality that distinguishes a lively and unpredictable exchange from a stale recitation of set speeches. To help young actors embrace the creative liberty required to achieve this, Meisner devised the Repetition Game, an exercise that is the cornerstone of his technique.

In the four courses that make up the Artistic Home's basic curriculum, the Repetition Game is not simply foundational; it fills more or less the entirety of the first eight-week session. While a few variations are introduced during that time, the essential exercise is at once simple and slightly terrifying. Having assembled on the risers in the small studio at the back of the theater, students are prompted by inspiration or the instructor's urging to come down, two at a time, for an unscripted confrontation. It begins by one of them making an observation ("You're nervous"), which the other has to repeat ("I'm nervous"), back and forth ("You're nervous," "I'm nervous," "You're nervous," "I'm nervous"), until, moved by an impulse, one of them makes a new observation ("You're annoyed"). Then the repetition, which includes any physical behavior that suits the moment, starts anew.

If this exercise strikes you as a bit deranged, you're not alone. Indeed, you'd be just like any student in a Meisner class encountering the Repetition Game for the first time. When you are called down in front of your fellow students, one question immediately flashes before your mind—"Oh God, what am I supposed to do?"—and it is that question, or any question for that matter, that exercise is designed to eliminate, in order to make way for something more primal.

"I wanted an exercise for actors where there is no intellectuality," Meisner writes in *On Acting*. "I wanted to eliminate all that 'head' work, to take away all the mental manipulation and get to where the impulses come from. And I began with the premise that if I repeat what I hear you saying, my head

If you want to inhabit a character with whom you share little in common, the ability to break free from familiar behavior, and the moral sense underwriting it, is vital.

is not working." That points to the primary reason for the stiff discomfort of the amateur actor or the gilded insincerity of the School of Representation—a head that is busy "working." Such self-awareness makes for bad acting, at least as far as Meisner was concerned. "My approach is based on bringing the actor back to his emotional impulses and to acting that is firmly rooted in the instinctive," he writes. "It is based on the fact that all good acting comes from the heart, as it were, and that there's no mentality in it."

Meisner's insight, which is ultimately essential to understanding the requirements of radical empathy, is that stable patterns of thought tend to confine our behavior. I don't mean this merely in terms of the restraints of self-consciousness, though so much of Meisner training, not least the Repetition Game, aims to unravel these, but more profoundly in terms of what I call in my dissertation the "sentimental physics" that determine the warp and woof of social engagement.

Long before we reach adulthood, we develop settled ways of engaging each other and inhabiting the world. These habits not only limit the range of our expressiveness, they establish well-worn grooves of preferred social behavior. Transcending them is no simple matter. That's not only because, like the manner in which we walk and talk, they are second nature to us, but also because, in the company of others, our conduct is not a series of isolated incidents. Whatever we do in such moments, we are always taking account of other people—whether to thwart, entice, comfort, or provoke them—and our words and deeds are informed by a moral sense that gives them parameters and purpose.

If you end up only playing yourself on stage—an eventuality for some actors, though usually inadvertent—such constraints are no great matter. But if you want to inhabit a character with whom you share little in common, the ability to break free from familiar behavior, and the moral sense underwriting it, is vital. I may treat my own dear mother with the utmost reverence, but if I am playing the Prince of Denmark, it must feel natural for me to give Gertrude a verbal thrashing.

The overriding aim of the Repetition Game and other improvisational exercises like it is fairly straightforward: to prepare the actor to meet another character wherever she's standing, rather than to force her to come to you. "Only the artist is responsible for stretching," Stella Adler, another of Stanislavky's American acolytes, writes in her guide to acting. "And it isn't easy. But when the artist does stretch, the entire world limbers up."

Stretching yourself in order to open up the entire world of human behavior is a provocative way of sizing up the requirements of radical empathy. Think of it this way: What would you have to do not merely to understand someone whose behavior is extravagant and strange—say, the mercurial self-destructiveness of Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler or the bumptious bestiality of *Streetcar*'s Stanley Kowalski—but to channel their feelings? The first task is no doubt challenging, but it is only the second that we would properly call empathy.

Meisner training can be emotionally confounding when it attempts to free up the range of one's behavior and thereby open a wider channel for an unruly community of characters. When I began my instruction, I hadn't yelled at anyone in fifteen years. By the end of it, I had grown accustomed to screaming my guts out. Guiding students through such an experience requires a hand that is disciplined, caring, and, above all else, conscientious. I was quite fortunate that, in an industry that is sometimes blithe about the health and welfare of young performers, the teaching staff at the Artistic Home, led by Kathy Scambiatterra, the artistic director and a formidable actress in her own right, is a model of professionalism.

Still, an actor's craft will never be without substantial peril because of the simple fact that, as a matter of practice, the actor must not only inure himself to deeply unnerving behavior, he must embrace it. Scambiatterra described this as "raising the stakes" of a scene. When we progressed from preliminary exercises to improvisational episodes, she advised us that we must always seek to make the strongest dramatic choices. We were not to behave with prudence or propriety but, as Voltaire once said of Shakespeare's art, with an eye toward "all that we can imagine of what is greatest and most powerful, with all that rudeness without wit can contain of what is lowest and most detestable."

Voltaire didn't mean this as a compliment. Whether because of a twinge of conscience or, more likely, a pang of jealousy, the imp of the French Enlightenment favored dramatic works that tidily reaffirmed the sensibilities of polite society. We, however, do not. Not typically—or at least, not on the stage. In our daily lives, the case is otherwise, a distinction that reminds us that the requirements of civilized conduct and those of the creative arts are not necessarily one and the same.

Meisner acknowledged this. "I don't like actors very much, though I do like to act," he said. "It's enjoyable—sometimes. But I don't like what it brings to the surface in my personality: the self-centeredness, the childish vanity, the infantilism. That's what an actor has to have."

Far be it for me to argue with one of the foremost acting teachers of the twentieth century, but from my own experience at the Artistic Home, Meisner seems to be confusing an essential requirement of an actor's craft with an occupational hazard of Stanislavsky-inspired systems. When they were filming *Marathon Man*, a young Dustin Hoffman explained to his esteemed co-star, Sir Lawrence Olivier, that he had stayed up for three days straight in order to achieve the cinematic

verisimilitude of a man who had, well, stayed up three days straight—to which the elder actor memorably replied, "My dear boy, why don't you just try acting?" What Olivier was driving at is a simple truth overlooked by many earnest young actors: one need not go mad to convincingly play a madman. Olivier understood this because he came to the stage without studying the Meisner Technique, Method Acting, or any of the other Stanislavsky offshoots, preferring to focus on the outward elements of an actor's craft that Stanislavsky identified with the School of Representation. That is a choice that British actors make far more than their American counterparts, who prefer the approaches that monkey with the mental habits that guide their behavior and invite the kind of inner lawlessness that Meisner somewhat charitably describes as "childish vanity." The promise of such acting techniques is that they can liberate us to understand and even channel the lives of others far different from ourselves, but that capacity can come at quite a price to one's moral and psychological stability.

Consider, again, *Come Back, Little Sheba*. To most members of the audience, the climactic encounter I described is most memorable for the crude theatrics of a frenzied stumblebum chasing his poor wife about the parlor. But even if you include the most treacherous elements of staging such an intensely physical scene—I rehearsed tumbling over a couch, hatchet in hand, more times than my poor knees care to remember—the greatest difficulty of inhabiting the part convincingly is channeling both venomous feelings of hatred and self-loathing.

In the scene, the husband Doc, drunk for the first time in years, returns home late at night after skipping the dinner his wife Lola has held for Marie, their boarder, and her fiancé, Bruce. Throughout the play, Doc's feelings toward the chipper co-ed are a combustible mix of unacknowledged attraction and paternal endearment, but she also represents a vitality and optimism the middle-aged man no longer enjoys, a reality for which Lola, disheveled and slightly dotty if also entirely devoted to him, serves as an infuriating reminder.

"Tell the world I'm drunk!" Doc screams at her, after smashing their fine china and trying to swipe her with the hatchet. "Tell the whole damn world. Scream your head off, you fat slut! Hollar till all the neighbors think I'm beating the hell outta you. Where's Bruce now? Under Marie's bed? You got all fresh and pretty for him, didn't you. Combed your hair for once, even washed the back of your neck, put on a girdle. You were willing to harness all that fat into a bundle!"

Lola's response highlights the fact that, whether or not Doc ultimately lays hold of her, the greatest blow has already been delivered. "I would rather you hit me with that ax," she tells her husband. "Honest I would. But I can't stand to hear you talk like that."

It's an unsparing scene, and for an actor to be successful in it, he must taste something of the acrid cruelty that poisons Doc. He must hate as Doc hates, a hatred for himself and for what his life has become, a hatred for which Lola is a symbol, an instrument, and an innocent bystander.

Today, far more than when I began my dissertation, we are confronted by people who seem liberated by their hate and liberal in their hatred, and there is some thought that empathy might be the antidote to a society fractured by such divisiveness. It's a nice idea, but one that I believe confuses empathy with other virtues: tolerance, understanding, amity, goodwill, and humility. Indeed, empathy is often regarded as being inclusive of these virtues, but that assumes the practice of empathy is conducive to them—indeed, that it endows us with a kind of moral perspicacity that elevates us above the parochial commitments that divide us.

Forgive me if I am unconvinced.

Set aside the practical challenge of convincing the ill-inclined to embrace empathy. What does it really mean to take this task seriously? Cultivating empathy is no small undertaking. Trying to feel what those who hate feel, sincerely and without censure, is no less exhausting than learning Farsi, mastering flamenco, or adopting any other craft of being until it becomes second nature. And yet, unlike these other tasks, the commitment to radical empathy also carries with it the danger of moral contamination. The same may be said of any exercise that asks us to stretch our consciousness far beyond the familiar, to make unexceptional and intimate that which is alien. As some of the greatest actors of the past fifty years have demonstrated, doing so may be consistent with creative genius, but the payoff, beyond the realm of arts and letters, is limited. I am certain the stage would be lost without them, but I am not so sure what channeling the seven deadly sins will teach me about being a better person.

One may be solicitous of the experience of others without ever exploring the outer bounds of empathy. Knowing the trials another has faced is not the same as enduring them, and as a matter of prescriptive ethics, the two make for very different invitations. The first is an encouragement to mutual understanding consistent with the claims of a compassionate pluralism; the second is a call to suffering and disorientation. It is only the first that a democratic politics demands.

Making a dedicated practice of stepping into the shoes of another is probably best left to the committed actors I met at the Artistic Home. For the rest of us concerned about a fractured world, a different task is in order: we can embrace the other-regarding impulse of empathy that honors the lives of others and attempts to reckon with their experiences, all while remembering that, in the face of pain and suffering, empathy isn't actually required. A humbler custom suffices: I needn't feel your pain for you to have my assistance.

JOHN PAUL ROLLERT *has written for the* New Republic, Harper's, *the* Washington Post, Slate, *and the* New York Times. *For writing featured in the* Atlantic, *he was recognized by the Society of American Business Editors and Writers in its 2017 "Best in Business" Competition.*

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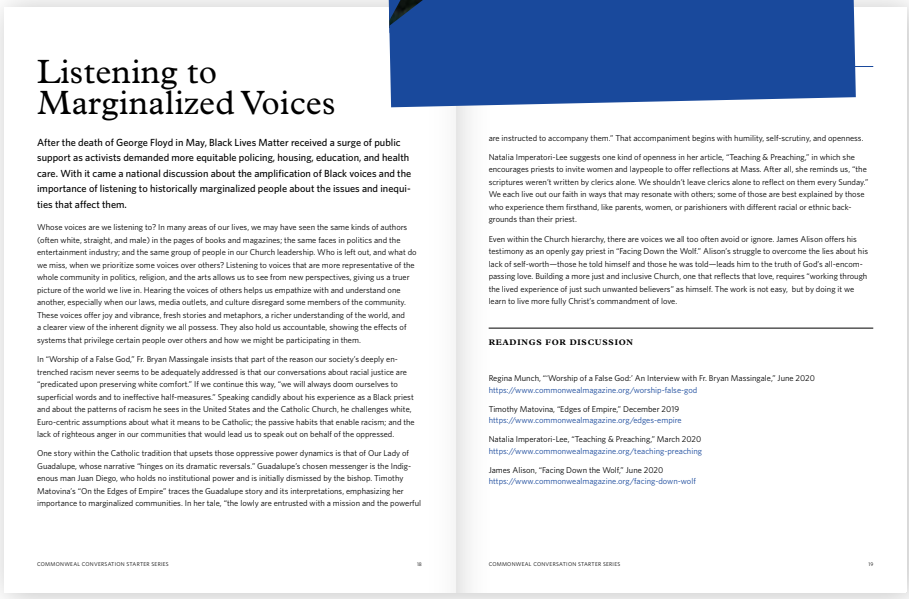


Listening to Marginalized Voices

After the death of George Floyd in May, Black Lives Matter received a surge of public support as activists demanded more equitable policing, housing, education, and health care. With it came a national discussion about the amplification of Black voices and the importance of listening to historically marginalized people about the issues and inequities that affect them.

Whose voices are we listening to? In many areas of our lives, we may have seen the same kinds of authors (often white, straight, and male) in the pages of books and magazines; the same faces in politics and the entertainment industry; and the same group of people in our Church leadership. Who is left out, and what do we miss, when we prioritize some voices over others? Listening to voices that are more representative of the whole community in politics, religion, and the arts allows us to see from new perspectives, giving us a truer picture of the world we live in. Hearing the voices of others helps us empathize with and understand one another, especially when our laws, media outlets, and culture disregard some members of the community. These voices offer joy and vibrance, fresh stories and metaphors, a richer understanding of the world, and a clearer view of the inherent dignity we all possess. They also hold us accountable, showing the effects of systems that privilege certain people over others and how we might be participating in them.

In "Worship of a False God," Fr. Bryan Massingale insists that part of the reason our society's deeply entrenched racism never seems to be adequately addressed is that our conversations about racial justice are "predicated upon preserving white comfort." If we continue this way, "we will always doom ourselves to superficial words and to ineffective half-measures." Speaking candidly about his experience as a Black priest and about the patterns of racism he sees in the United States and the Catholic Church, he challenges white, Euro-centric assumptions about what it means to be Catholic; the passive habits that enable racism; and the lack of righteous anger in our communities that would lead us to speak out on behalf of the oppressed.

One story within the Catholic tradition that upsets those oppressive power dynamics is that of Our Lady of Guadalupe, whose narrative "hinges on its dramatic reversals." Guadalupe's chosen messenger is the Indigenous man Juan Diego, who holds no institutional power and is initially dismissed by the bishop. Timothy Matovina's "On the Edges of Empire" traces the Guadalupe story and its interpretations, emphasizing her importance to marginalized communities. In her tale, "the lowly are entrusted with a mission and the powerful

are instructed to accompany them." That accompaniment begins with humility, self-scrutiny, and openness.

Natalia Imperatori-Lee suggests one kind of openness in her article, "Teaching & Preaching," in which she encourages priests to invite women and laypeople to offer reflections at Mass. After all, she reminds us, "the scriptures weren't written by clerics alone. We shouldn't leave clerics alone to reflect on them every Sunday." We each live out our faith in ways that may resonate with others; some of those are best explained by those who experience them firsthand, like parents, women, or parishioners with different racial or ethnic backgrounds than their priest.

Even within the Church hierarchy, there are voices we all too often avoid or ignore. James Alison offers his testimony as an openly gay priest in "Facing Down the Wolf." Alison's struggle to overcome the lies about his lack of self-worth—those he told himself and those he was told—leads him to the truth of God's all-encompassing love. Building a more just and inclusive Church, one that reflects that love, requires "working through the lived experience of just such unwanted believers" as himself. The work is not easy, but by doing it we learn to live more fully Christ's commandment of love.

READINGS FOR DISCUSSION

Regina Munch, "'Worship of a False God:' An Interview with Fr. Bryan Massingale," June 2020
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/worship-false-god

Timothy Matovina, "Edges of Empire," December 2019
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/edges-empire

Natalia Imperatori-Lee, "Teaching & Preaching," March 2020
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/teaching-preaching

James Alison, "Facing Down the Wolf," June 2020
https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/facing-down-wolf

REVELATION HYMN

A. M. Juster

To regather will, I embrace
my tin soul with timorous joy.
A new heaven and a new earth

have eclipsed the old, and the force
of fresh grace unsettles the world.
To regather will, I embrace

unstable, staggering light;
it reshapes the dusk and unshrouds
the new heaven and the new earth.

As nerves ignite in dead limbs,
my vision dims and I rise
to regather will. I embrace

the unreconciled and the lost,
then praise in miscarried words
this new heaven and this new earth.

I would shout in tongues in the streets,
yet I stammer, straining for grace
to regather. Will I embrace
my new Heaven and my new Earth?

A. M. JUSTER's *tenth book of original and translated poetry is* Wonder and Wrath *(Paul Dry Books, 2020); W. W. Norton will publish his translation of Petrarch's* Canzoniere *in 2023. His work has appeared in* Poetry, Paris Review, *and* Hudson Review, *and he has won a number of awards, including the Richard Wilbur Award. For his career in public service he has received two honorary degrees and the Alzheimer's Association's Humanitarian of the Year Award.*

Servant of Memory

An interview with Barry Lopez

Griffin Oleynick

Barry Lopez, winner of the National Book Award for Arctic Dreams *(1986), a nonfiction account of his five years spent living with the Inuit people in the Canadian High Arctic, and author of numerous other books about nature and indigenous peoples, including* Of Wolves and Men *(1978),* Crow and Weasel *(1990), and* Light Action in the Caribbean *(2000), died on December 25, 2020. He spoke with assistant editor Griffin Oleynick for the Commonweal Podcast in August 2019 about his final book,* Horizon *(2019). This interview is adapted from their conversation.*

GRIFFIN OLEYNICK: *Horizon* is a magisterial work. It's both a record of many decades of travel all across the globe—to places as remote as the Galápagos Islands, the Kenyan Desert, and Antarctica—as well as a reflection on your encounters with indigenous cultures. It also feels like your swan song. Why did you write it, and what do you want it to communicate?

BARRY LOPEZ: The Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, who passed away a few years ago, defined the writer as the "servant of memory." I once asked him whether he understood the writer as the servant of his or her *own* memory, or the memory of his or her *people*? And he said, "Well Barry, it's both!"

In *Horizon* I'm trying to remember the harm that has been caused by human beings and bring it to the foreground. Each day we listen to the news and think, "My goodness, are we never done with this?" If we don't learn how to have a truly international conversation about global climate change, ocean acidification, and methane gas pouring out of the tundra, we're a sunk ship. The trouble facing us is much larger than we're willing to publicly discuss. It's not just global climate change, but also the failure of democracy to defend itself against incursions by people whose primary goal is the accumulation of material wealth. That's going to collapse, and then where will we be?

The only answer is that we will have to learn to help each other. I think the disaster that is coming will be overwhelming, and lots of people will not make it. But if we can find some way to encourage each other, to offer mutual assistance, a lot more of us will be able to figure out how to get through it. I'm nobody special, but I've been immersed in this stuff for a long time, and I wanted to articulate a sense of possibility, something in which people can place their hope. I don't mean that as a Pollyannaish thing, but as a legitimate way of saying, "This, too, is us."

GO: You highlight the key role played by the creative arts, especially music, in this project of cultural healing, of reassembling a broken world. And you write movingly about one instance in which a work of art helped you overcome a personal failure. Tell us about that.

BL: A number of years ago, I was working on an archaeological site in the Canadian High Arctic. We were excavating the

DAVID LITTSCHWAGER

Opposite page: Barry Lopez

Theologians talk about *agape*, the love of the divine in another human being. I have been steeped for many years in some kind of intercourse with a non-human world, and for me it too is characterized by this love, by *agape*—the sense of a world larger than the self.

former homes of people known as the Thule, who lived eight or nine hundred years ago. They're the ancestors of modern Eskimos and Inuits.

One night, I decided to bring my Walkman to the site and play Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which for me is one of the most beautiful pieces of music anyone in Western culture has ever produced. I thought of it as a way of conversing with the ghosts of the Thule, explaining to them what we in the West are like, what our culture had achieved, and then asking, "Well, what about you?"

But I walked into a trap of my own making. I quickly realized that this was one of the most despicable, racist things I had ever done in my life. I felt a tremendous sense of shame, and after the first movement I shut the thing down, apologized, and left. This brought about a serious crisis of self-confidence. I lost faith in myself; I thought I was a fraud. I got stuck in a very bad place.

And then I heard a short piece of music, Arvo Pärt's "Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten," just six or seven minutes long. It's a kind of stand-your-hair-on-end tribute, and somewhere in those six or seven minutes I understood both the nature of my trespass and the tragedy of my failure. I can't today explain how the piece of music helped me put things back together inside myself, but some years later, when I had the chance to meet the composer, I expressed my gratitude.

One of the things that's difficult to live with in America is the emphasis we put on the self and on the achievements of the self. This is counterproductive. In order to make a more just world, it's necessary to cooperate. That's something that's struck me very forcefully among native peoples that I traveled with. I've been doing this a long time, and I do not want to be something other than what I am. I don't want to join some other culture. But I do want to learn from other cultures, especially about the nature of God and the divine.

Theologians talk about *agape*, the love of the divine in another human being. I have been steeped for many years in some kind of intercourse with a non-human world, and for me it too is characterized by this love, by *agape*—the sense of a world larger than the self. Love can come brilliantly to life in the non-human world, in nature, and that speaks to the fact that we're all in this together.

When I travel, it has also been my habit to ask native peoples about their use of the word "storyteller." What does the word mean? What kind of a person is a storyteller? What is their function? In the Inuktitut language, the word is *isumataq*. In English, it means something like "the person who creates the atmosphere in which wisdom reveals itself."

In other words, it's not about the writer. It's not about the artist. It is about the music, the photograph, the painting, the choreography, the novel, or whatever that thing is that makes the fundamental mystery of life clearer for its audience. It has to enhance our sense of our own self-worth, of being important, of not being marginalized, because we live in a world where many people are left behind, without the wherewithal to protect themselves.

GO: You mentioned theology, and that's in part a reflection of your Catholic educational formation. How has that shaped your interests and career?

BL: I went to a Jesuit high school in New York City, and I went on to get two degrees at the University of Notre Dame. But when I finished my master's degree, I thought, "I must have missed the whole thing!" I was "educated" in one sense, but I didn't know very much about the world because I went to school with people just like me: male, middle-class, Catholic, etc.

So I scratched my head figuratively and said, "How in the world do you think you can call yourself an educated person, when everything you've been exposed to is all about you?" That's what pushed me out of my middle-class comfort; I wanted to go and find out what was happening in the rest of the world.

I also began to believe that there was goodness and wisdom out in the world, and that the strictures that are sometimes rigidly enforced in a Christian education or upbringing can be short-sighted. I don't think you can find wisdom the way the Desert Fathers did, isolating themselves from humanity and developing a pure relationship with the divine. For me the divine began to be that which is found only in the company of other people—and especially in people not like you!

I once considered becoming a monk. I knew about Gethsemane, where Thomas Merton was, so I went there to sort of get the lay of the land. And it was an elevating experience, to come down in the morning and see those muddy boots lined up outside the chapel and all of those men in immaculate white clothes, with their farm jackets hung on hooks.

At first I thought, "This is it for me": physical labor, contemplation, seeking enlightened connection with the divine. But I got a very clear message that it wasn't, that there was something else out there for me.

GO: You conclude *Horizon* with a meditation on a religious experience you had on a road outside a folk chapel at Punta Arenas, in far southern Chile, nearly thirty years ago. What happened that day, and what does it mean for you now?

BL: That day was, and is, a mystery for me. I was driving slowly from Punta Arenas to Port Famine, and it was beautiful—broken skies, the kind of weather in which you would expect to see a rainbow. I just took it in, this panorama of

the Tierra del Fuego, looking out from an altitude of eight hundred feet above the coastline.

I was in ecstasy, and I looked up on this dirt road and saw a man walking toward me. I was so riveted by him, I just took my foot off the accelerator, and let the vehicle roll to a stop. As he was walking toward me, determined, and not paying any attention to me a rainbow opened up above his head. I paused, wondering "What's going to come now?"

I had that feeling that it was a holy thing. I felt that a door had opened, and in that moment I chose not to go through it. I understood the door as an invitation: to step into the wordless, to step into the evaporation of the self, to become one with what lies on the other side. It's kind of a Bodhisattva thing: you refuse to go into the holy alone, because you want *everyone* to go in.

I went on from that encounter to the chapel, and I was overwhelmed with tenderness for the people there. They were desperate, in one way or another, asking the Blessed Mother for intercession. They were pinning up *milagros*, or miracle votives, which represent their plea for succor, for an easing of their burden.

What came up out of me were feelings of compassion and tenderness, the feeling that you would just embrace everyone there to say, "Don't be afraid, we're in this together. We will all be taking care of each other, and we are in the presence of the divine here"—as ordinary as that moment was, with simple benches in that little chapel, with people of no material means.

And it was out of that feeling of tenderness that I thought, "What is out there that is *calling* to us, what is the music that is coming from the far side of the horizon? What is it saying to us?" So I wanted to conclude *Horizon* with the reader asking themselves: "What am *I* to make of this?" The accumulation of material wealth, which was *never* a good idea, is over now. What we're talking about is survival, and the elevation of the spirit, cooperation, and the cardinal virtues of justice and compassion.

That, for me, is my particular road into the divine: driving alongside a fence, where on every fourth or fifth fencepost was a caracara bird sitting and watching me. Everyone has the path for them to enter the numinous landscape of the divine. Throughout my life, mine happened to be provided by wild animals. That's just what I knew, and in some way it's *all* I knew.

But that's not some kind of promotion of natural history. It's just a metaphor that I understand well enough to be able to write about with some kind of insight. Somebody else can do the same thing in cities, by having a greater sensitivity to their numinous qualities than I do. In the end, *Horizon* is just one book, and one person wrote it. And God willing, there will be another book from somebody else. And that book will open up the numinous for people who don't have any interest in reading what I have to say.

GRIFFIN OLEYNICK *is an assistant editor at* Commonweal.

LISTEN Hear the full interview with Barry Lopez on Episode 16 of the Commonweal Podcast. **commonwealmagazine.org/podcast**

POETRY

POTATO SETTING
For Vigdis Storsletten

Michael Cadnum

A string bag of them gives off
the wet smell of earth before anything.
The year is infant, and trees stand
with their naked wood.
Nothing lies down beside nothing.
Even ice is on and off, gone, still here,
thawing, shivering,
I'll show you—come see.
The road is one long puddle.

The sun floats up, and stops.
The magpie waits to be two. The sparrow hides

beside the mailbox on its iron post, hedge
nailed together by thorns.
        The house
is one black window. The school is

a blue slate roof. The playground is empty,
and on the field
even the sheep are vanished as she

says nothing, no word, no word,
no word enough and cuts
the world into soil.

MICHAEL CADNUM *has published nearly forty books, including the National Book Award Finalist novel* The Book of the Lion. *His most recent book of poetry,* Kingdom, *includes many poems that first appeared in* Commonweal. *He is working on a new book of poems,* The Promised Rain. *He lives in Albany, California.*

Looking Down from the High Ground

PAUL BAUMANN

As an ardent and occasionally shameless admirer of President Barack Obama, I am chagrined to report that his newest memoir, *A Promised Land*, is a very tough read. It's too long, too wonkish, too determined to explain all sides of a particular problem or political decision, and curiously of two minds about its audience. I realize this judgment runs counter to most other reviews, so let me explain. On one hand, Obama wants to give the reader a sense of "what it is like to *be* the president of the United States." What is the daily routine? How does it feel to be under such scrutiny, to have one's every word and action questioned and analyzed? To suddenly be given "the authority to blow up the world"? How does family life go on in the White House and under the unforgiving glare of the media? How can a president and his family maintain a semblance of normal life in such a fish bowl? How does a president find a moment of solitude and decompression in a job that demands nothing less than his complete attention for fourteen or more hours a day?

We learn that Obama curses a lot, jokes a lot, cries sometimes, and enjoys a weekend martini and his regular pick-up basketball game. A child of divorce who met his own father just once after infancy, his responsibilities as husband and father are of the utmost importance to him. He is naturally concerned about how the pressures and dangers of such a public life affect Michelle and his young daughters, although the children seem to thrive. Michelle, he makes clear, never shared his presidential aspirations, and took to the campaign trail reluctantly. Between the demands of the office and the needs of his family, he searches for a measure of calm and perspective in a situation where one's domestic political opponents are out for blood and the nation's adversaries are eager to exploit any weakness. Nor is there any escape from how America's tortured racial history and continuing strife impinge on how the decisions of the nation's first Black president are received. He sees his election as a vindication of America's promise of equality for all, but also as an answer of sorts to the question of just who he is and what his destiny might be as the American child of a Black African father and a white, Kansas-born mother.

A PROMISED LAND

BARACK OBAMA
Crown
$45 | 768 pp.

At the same time, Obama wants to conduct a tutorial on a host of issues and conflicts that confronted him during his campaign and first term (2009–2013), ranging from the nitty-gritty of his surprising win in the Iowa caucuses to the engineering challenges of stopping the *Deepwater Horizon*'s catastrophic oil spill. (This first volume of *A Promised Land* covers his administration through May 2011, halfway through his third year in office.) As one might imagine, he does this with admirable clarity and attention to detail, although that detail can at times make the book read like a blizzard of names. The pace is relentless. Seemingly everything of consequence is covered, from the history of U.S. relations with post-Soviet Russia, Iran, China, Egypt, Israel, and so on, to the ever-present threat of terrorism, the economic and political challenges of curbing climate change, the conundrums of global trade, the higher math of bank bailouts, the political bargaining surrounding the Affordable Care Act, and much more. As a result, there is a pedagogical tone to the book that can try even the most attentive student. Obama's two very different writerly ambitions never quite mesh, and the result is that the livelier, more personal interludes with family, friends, and colleagues come as welcome respite from the prolix focus on issues, decisions, conferences, and endless meetings with "my team." In short, *A Promised Land* is likely to prove an invaluable resource for historians, but a decorative ornament or totem on other bookshelves.

Barack Obama in Philadelphia, October 21, 2020

CNS PHOTO/KEVIN LAMARQUE, REUTERS

Obama succeeds at reminding the reader that his presidency, like most, was an endless string of crises he had little or nothing to do with creating but had to solve. He came to office, of course, in the midst of the 2008 financial meltdown and the Great Recession. His options were limited. Banks were going under, and unless the financial system could be salvaged, another Great Depression loomed. He had little sympathy for bankers, whom he characterizes as "clueless," but punishing them, as those on the Left were demanding, would do little to stabilize the economy or put people back to work. With the "world economy in free fall," his first task was to prevent "further disaster," not "remake the economic order." Despite his undeniable rhetorical skills, he sees himself as a dealmaker, not the utopian agent of change some voters imagined he was. "Trying to straddle the line between the public's demand for Old Testament justice and the financial markets' need for reassurance, we ended up satisfying no one," he admits. That was a result often repeated.

The TARP Act passed under President George W. Bush, his own administration's Recovery Act (which garnered only three Republican votes), and the "stress tests" imposed on financial institutions succeeded in recapitalizing the banks and broke the economic panic. The banks would repay, with interest, the enormous sums lent by the government, although the public seems to have judged that a minor accomplishment when weighed against the ongoing ravages of unemployment and foreclosures. In any event, Obama also faced the impending collapse of the automobile industry. Again, he and his "team" came up with a solution. As his handling of these initial calamities showed, he sought compromise, not capitulation, from his political opponents on both the Right and the Left. "My first hundred days in office revealed a basic strand of my political character," he writes. "I was a reformer, conservative in temperament if not in vision. Whether I was demonstrating wisdom or weakness would be for others to judge."

A certain fatalism seems to have accompanied those outcomes. "That was another lesson the presidency was teaching me: Sometimes it didn't matter how good your process was," he writes. "Sometimes you were just screwed, and the best you could do was have a stiff drink—and light up a cigarette." Obama later confesses that the demands of the presidency enabled him to accomplish something else: he eventually gave up a furtive smoking habit.

One real strength of the book is the acutely observed portraits of both foreign leaders and his Republican antagonists. Germany's Angela Merkel is praised for her deliberate and untheatrical approach to politics and international affairs, one that obviously mir-

Putin reminded Obama of a Chicago ward boss, 'except with nukes and a U.N. Security Council veto.'

rored the president's own "No Drama Obama" temperament. "Merkel's eyes were big and bright blue and could be touched by turns with frustration, amusement, or hints of sorrow," he writes. "Otherwise her stolid appearance reflected her no-nonsense, analytical sensibility." France's president Nicolas Sarkozy was a very different piece of work. He "was all emotional outbursts and overblown rhetoric." In a gossipy aside, Obama tells us that Sarkozy wore lifts in his shoes. During his initial meeting with Vladimir Putin, held at Putin's lavish dacha outside Moscow, Obama is subjected to a nearly hour-long harangue on U.S. arrogance and depredations in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's demise. Putin reminded Obama of a Chicago ward boss, "except with nukes and a U.N. Security Council veto," he writes. Those pols, like Putin, were "tough, street smart, unsentimental characters who knew what they knew, who never moved outside their narrow experiences, and who viewed patronage, bribery, shakedowns, fraud, and occasional violence as legitimate tools of the trade."

We are told similarly shrewd and amusing things about Republicans and their zero-sum approach to politics. Senators Chuck Grassley and Olympia Snowe make a show of bipartisanship but a show is all it is. Mitch McConnell, who famously boasted that his goal as Senate majority leader was to make Obama a one-term president, is as cynical and charming as he appears. "As far as anyone could tell, he had no close friends even in his own caucus; nor did he appear to have any strong convictions beyond an almost religious opposition to any version of campaign finance reform," Obama writes. Joe Biden told Obama of an incident in the Senate when McConnell blocked a bill Biden was sponsoring. When Biden tried to explain what he hoped the bill would accomplish, McConnell stopped him by raising his hand. "You must be under the mistaken impression that I care," McConnell said.

Given the tenacious Republican opposition to every Democratic initiative and Trump's ascendency, *A Promised Land* is a useful reminder of how much Obama's administration actually accomplished. In his first two years in office, he spent much of his political capital passing the Affordable Care Act, and as a consequence Democrats suffered a resounding defeat in the 2010 midterms, which handed both houses of Congress to the Republicans. At the time, even sympathetic critics thought Obama should have focused exclusively on the economy rather than such an ambitious new government program. Obama does not often concede serious error. He wants to insist that given the political, economic, military, or geopolitical constraints he was working with, he usually made the best decision available. But no one is that wise or that lucky. To clinch these sorts of arguments, Obama relies on transitions such as "still" and "yet," or phrases like "in a perfectly rational world that might have made sense." These caveats come across as much too lawyerly. Nor does he offer a defense of his much-criticized use of drones to assassinate terrorist suspects. The agreement with the Iraqis to withdraw U.S. troops is mentioned in passing, but not the consequent rise of the Islamic State. Presumably he will tackle those choices in the second volume of his memoir. His somewhat surprising deployment of more troops to Afghanistan in 2010 was the result of lengthy negotiations with the Pentagon and commanders in the field—in short, a lot of "process." "It forced us to refine America's strategic objectives in Afghanistan in a way that prevented mission creep," Obama writes. What it did not do was provide an exit strategy for the longest war in U.S. history, a quagmire that Trump exploited in his campaign and that President Biden now inherits.

I have never understood the unhinged reaction so many Republicans had to Obama, since it seemed to me that he usually made the most reasonable and fair-minded case for his agenda, often acknowledging the legitimate concerns of his political opponents. Perhaps the best explanation I've come across for Republican rage was by the *Week*'s columnist Damon Linker, a former *First Things* editor. Linker suggests that it is not racial animosity but the way Obama places himself above the ideological struggle that drives his political rivals nuts. Obama, Linker writes, "doesn't know how to speak in any *other* rhetorical register than above and beyond the partisan fray.... He's a master of using a rhetoric of elevation to ennoble himself and his allies while casting implicit moral aspersions on his political foes, whom he portrays as self-evidently dishonorable, all the while sounding as if he's merely reciting the indisputable facts of the case. His tone at all times is that of a disapproving parent: You should be ashamed of yourselves."

To be honest, much of *A Promised Land* is written in that register, and it wearies even an Obama enthusiast like me. A good example is Obama's discussion of the bill that ended the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy regarding homosexuals. Obama assures the reader that he does not dismiss as "bigots" those who disagree with him about LGBTQ issues. Why? Because he himself had once held similarly unenlightened attitudes. In college he became aware of the damaging effects of such prejudice. "I felt ashamed of my past behavior—and learned to do better," he writes. Friendships with LGBTQ people "opened my heart to the human dimensions of issues that I'd once thought of in mainly abstract terms."

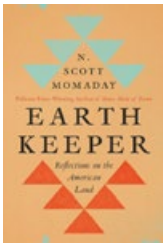
Unmentioned is the fact that Obama opposed legalizing same-sex marriage at the time. Nor does he discuss why he changed his mind about "marriage equality" shortly before the 2012 election or how partisan reasons might have influenced that decision. He claims not to judge those with traditional religious

objections to issues such as same-sex marriage, but then describes his own evolution as the gradual abandonment of precisely such supposed bigotry. Finally, he equates disagreement with the LGBTQ community's call for equal rights with the historical battle against racism and segregation. Despite his demurral, the logic of his argument casts into the darkness those who think moral distinctions can be made between the evil of racial discrimination and religious objections to redefining marriage. Even supporters of same-sex marriage should be able to see how galling Obama's disapproving parental tone can be.

The specter of Donald Trump, the "country's leading distraction," haunts this book. Why did America turn to an undeniable bigot and transparent charlatan after it had shown so much promise of overcoming its original sin by placing a Black man with a foreign-sounding name in the Oval Office? Replacing Trump with Biden has brought a momentary course correction. But we remain a deeply divided country, torn by conflicts over fundamental issues, not just of economic fairness and health-care accessibility, but of perhaps even more perplexing questions about family formation, gender, sexual morality, and abortion. Obama too often dismisses these disagreements as "wedge issues" or "culture war" distractions. Trump's takeover of the Republican Party revealed how corrupt and cynical the GOP has been in its decades-long assault on the good and necessary things that government must do. But in a democracy, where "public sentiment," as Lincoln famously remarked, "is everything," the moral and cultural anxieties of half the population cannot be assuaged by claiming the moral high ground only for oneself. To avoid the return of Trumpism, we should admit that the consequences of disorienting societal change are uncertain. No one should declare victory until we know what has truly been won.

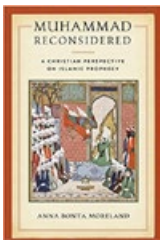
PAUL BAUMANN *is* Commonweal*'s senior writer.*

BOOKS IN BRIEF



EARTH KEEPER
Reflections on the American Land
N. SCOTT MOMADAY
Harper
$17.99 | 80 pp.

"This is a declaration of belonging," writes Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday at the start of *Earth Keeper: Reflections on the American Land*. Equal parts memoir, folklore, and poetry, *Earth Keeper* is above all a work of great reverence, an appreciation for the earth and the relationship we cultivate with it. Confronted by today's rampant environmental destruction, it's common to indulge in a kind of helpless declaration of complicity, as though internalizing guilt is the only response. While recognizing our complicity is important, Momaday writes, "the earth does not want shame. It wants love." It wants us to engage, to marvel at its ineffable beauty—and above all, to "strive with all [our] strength to give that sense of wonder to those who will come after."



MUHAMMAD RECONSIDERED
A Christian Perspective on Islamic Prophecy
ANNA BONTA MORELAND
University of Notre Dame Press
$45 | 192 pp.

Can Christians consider Muhammad a prophet? What would it mean for them to do so? Theologian Anna Bonta Moreland invites us to explore that possibility in *Muhammad Reconsidered*. Analyzing documents from the Second Vatican Council about the "overlapping web of beliefs" between Christians and Muslims, as well as Thomas Aquinas's writings on prophecy and revelation, Moreland demonstrates that it is at least possible, in principle, for Muhammad to be considered a prophet. The book seeks to avoid two extremes: a univocal position that demands other traditions conform to Christian terms, and an equivocal position that erases vital differences without reckoning with them. In doing so, it suggests an analogical understanding of prophecy. As Moreland writes, "Listening to the seeds of the Word in other faith traditions means we are listening more—not less—attentively, to the words of the Gospel."

THE UNDOCUMENTED AMERICANS
KARLA CORNEJO VILLAVICENCIO
One World
$26 | 208 pp.

"If you're going to write a book about undocumented immigrants in America," writes Karla Cornejo Villavicencio in her National Book Award–nominated memoir, *The Undocumented Americans*, "you have to be a little bit crazy." What Cornejo Villavicencio, a DACA recipient with degrees from Harvard and Yale, is too modest to say is that you also have to be a really good writer. What begins as an exercise in compassionate listening and rigorous reporting on the lives of undocumented immigrants across the country—from the street corners of Staten Island to the *botanicas* of Miami—is artfully woven into a beautiful autobiographical portrait of vulnerability. There's no "happy ending" here for the author or her subjects, no easy resilience from the myriad traumas wrought by the U.S. government. If Cornejo Villavicencio can't exactly provide hope, she gives us something just as important: honesty, and an invitation to communion with those whose unspeakable suffering continues.

The Past Catches up with Postmodernism

ADAM FLEMING PETTY

Whatever happened to postmodernism? Once, it looked like the future of fiction. The first wave of postmodern novelists in the 1970s, like Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, were brilliant, but could run cold. Their heirs in the 1990s produced dense novels that diagrammed the world's vast systems while also portraying the living, breathing humans caught within them. David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Franzen stood at the forefront of this movement; others included Mark Leyner, Rick Moody, and a young George Saunders. These names were everywhere, and their descendants, one assumed, would be legion. That has not been the case.

It's not hard to understand why. Every writer mentioned in the paragraph above is a straight white male, and the postmodern novel is often regarded as a form by and for that demographic. There is some accuracy to this observation: most survey courses in postmodern fiction tend to skew pale and male. But this fact can prevent people from recognizing the possibilities of postmodern fiction's future. A number of writers today, emerging as well as established, are grappling with the influence of postmodernism. But none of them are white men, and so this influence often remains unnoticed. "All postmodern writers are white men; therefore, writers who are not white men cannot be postmodern," the reasoning, such as it is, seems to go.

RED PILL
A Novel

HARI KUNZRU
Knopf
$27.95 | 304 pp.

Dana Spiotta and Rachel Kushner, mid-career writers, extend the postmodern obsession with systems and secrets into the experiences of women. Spiotta's *Innocents and Others* is the story of two women, both filmmakers, in a push-pull friendship of ambition and jealousy. Kushner's *The Mars Room* depicts a women's prison not unlike the way Wallace's *Infinite Jest* depicts a tennis academy: as a microcosm of control and coercion, shaping every aspect of its occupants' lives. Non-white novelists are looking to the postmodern playbook

Hari Kunzru

PAKO MERA/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

as well. *Call Me Zebra* by Iranian-American Azareen Van Der Vliet Oloomi is a riotous labyrinth of literary allusions about a young woman fleeing war-torn Iran, while the Korean-American Tracy O'Neill's *The Quotients* describes the finance and surveillance industries with the obsessive questing of early DeLillo. It turns out that an era of systemic failure is well-suited for the postmodern-systems novel.

Chief among these contemporary inheritors of postmodernism is Hari Kunzru. Born in London to an Indian father and a British mother, and now living in the United States, Kunzru has been writing novels for almost twenty years, mixing and matching literary techniques with genre conventions. In 2017, he published *White Tears*, one of the finest novels of the decade. The novel follows Seth, an audio engineer in Brooklyn who produces records for hipster musicians looking to capture an authentic vintage sound—with "authentic" referring to blues music performed by Black artists in the early twentieth century. Seth is walking around Brooklyn one day, recording street sounds for his audio library, when he inadvertently records a busker performing a blues song. Seth can't remember hearing the song, but there it is, on the recording. Tracing the origins of the song leads Seth into a nightmarish journey of murder, ghosts, cultural appropriation, and the prison-industrial complex.

White Tears deployed two major tropes of postmodern fiction: the Quest and the System. The Quest harks back to the medieval "Grail" legends, while the System embodies the alienating institutions of late capitalism. Postmodern fiction is born from this fusion of traditional tropes with modern life. Think of *Gravity's Rainbow*, where different factions try to capture the Rocket from an industrialized military system that has ruined Europe; or DeLillo's *Running Dog*, where a rumored sex tape of Hitler draws the attention of politicians and mercenaries; or *Infinite Jest*, the most famous example, where the titular movie is so entertaining that viewers watch it until they die. Kunzru uses these devices in *White Tears*—old blues song serving as Grail, the legacy of slavery as System—to tell an affecting, disturbing story perfectly attuned to the present moment.

Kunzru's new novel, *Red Pill*, like *White Tears*, offers a contemporary gloss on the postmodern quest narrative. In *White Tears*, the past is a ghost haunting the present; in *Red Pill*, the past is an invader conquering the future.

The unnamed narrator of *Red Pill* is struggling to write a new book after his previous effort achieved modest success. Thankfully, he receives a three-month fellowship from the Deuter Center in Berlin, an institute where writers, artists, and thinkers gather to pursue their own projects and rub elbows with fellow geniuses. Once there, however, the narrator finds writing impossible. Rather than cozy, quiet cubicles of their own, guests are expected to work in an open-plan office, like drones at a startup. The narrator can't work under these conditions; he instead divides his time between walking around Lake Wannsee, passing a monument to the doomed writer Heinrich Von Kleist, and streaming a television show called *Blue Lives* in his room. *Blue Lives* is one of those ultraviolent shows about cops bending the rules to keep evil at bay. The narrator becomes obsessed with the show, especially when characters break the fourth wall and say things like "there is no instant of time when one creature is not being devoured by another." At one point, for a change of pace, the narrator decides to do actual research, and discovers that this is a quote from Joseph-Marie, comte de Maistre—a reactionary philosopher who held that monarchy was the only viable form of government and that the French Revolution was a tragic mistake that plunged society into chaos.

After a hundred pages of this Continental stasis, the narrator goes to a party, an awareness-raising event where models dress like refugees and the cultural elite make dinner plans. There he meets none other than Gary "Anton" Bridgeman, the creator of *Blue Lives*. Anton brushes off the narrator's attempt to ascribe any larger meaning to the random quotations from reactionary philosophers. But the narrator is convinced Anton has a plan to "red pill" the show's viewers, convincing them to give up their freedoms in exchange for protection from a fascist police state.

The narrator is the archetypal hero of the postmodern quest narrative. Like Tyrone Slothrop and Hal Incandenza before him, he is a paranoiac convinced that he's discovered a hidden code beneath the surface of everyday life, and is trying to unmask it. Everyone in his life naturally thinks he's lost the plot. But the reader can see what's coming. *Red Pill* takes place during the months leading up the 2016 election, a recent event that, just a few years later, somehow feels ancient. The message boards and spam accounts that the narrator pores over, searching for evidence of Anton's nefarious influence, are the very forces that will go on to meme Trump into the White House. For paranoiacs, nothing is worse than being proved right.

Red Pill grapples with a maddening question: How to write postmodern fiction about a world gone postmodern? In *Infinite Jest*, the president of a dystopian United States was Johnny Gently, former Vegas crooner, given to using "boss" as his preferred adjective to describe the state of the economy. That was funny in the nineties, but hardly elicits a chuckle today. Kunzru's approach involves foregrounding the postmodern present with a wealth of historical precedents, from West Germany to eighteenth-century Romanticism. The United States, Kunzru says, is not as unique as it thinks. Historical forces are now catching up with it. It is precisely the kind of insight that a postmodern novelist positioned outside the genre's white male canon is especially well-suited to offer.

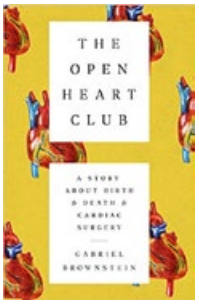
ADAM FLEMING PETTY *is the author of a novella,* Followers. *His essays have appeared in the* Paris Review Daily, Electric Literature, Vulture, *and other outlets. He lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan.*

Denied admission to medical school, Maude Abbott still became an expert on congenital heart deformity.

'The Miracle of Everything'

RAND RICHARDS COOPER

Was Gabriel Brownstein born under an unlucky star, or the opposite? A fifty-four-year-old novelist and teacher, Brownstein suffers from a rare and strangely literary-sounding congenital coronary syndrome known as the tetralogy of Fallot, a perfect storm of coronary defects that includes a hole in the center of his heart, a narrowed pulmonary valve, a displaced aorta, and an enlarged right ventricle. Named for a nineteenth-century French physician, the condition was long considered untreatable and sufferers—called "blue babies" for the bluish cast that poor circulation gives their skin—rarely survived adolescence. In *The Open Heart Club*, Brownstein relates the biography of his heart problem, and a lot more.



THE OPEN HEART CLUB
A Story about Birth and Death and Cardiac Surgery

GABRIEL BROWNSTEIN
PublicAffairs
$28 | 368 pp.

The Open Heart Club charts the history of congenital heart defects and of the medical science that arose to comprehend and ultimately correct them. Brownstein delves into the Europe of four centuries ago to serve up lively accounts of groundbreaking physicians like William Harvey, who studied animal physiology and theorized that blood circulated through the body—an idea his contemporaries considered blasphemous—and Nicolaus Steno, a Danish polymath who first described the tetralogy, and whose research, delivered in lectures to large audiences of medical students across the continent, dramatically advanced the study of coronary anatomy. These Reformation-era anatomists, driven by furious curiosity about the workings of the heart, held that to know nature was to know God—that "one sins against the majesty of God," as Steno wrote, "by being unwilling to look into nature's own works."

Brownstein rounds out the saga with a surprisingly diverse cast of modern characters. We meet such figures as Vivien Thomas, a Black medical technician who achieved prominence at Johns Hopkins in the 1940s—despite being refused use of the main hospital entrance and having to drink from the "Colored" water fountain—and who devised a shunt that enabled "tet" patients to survive. Or Maude Abbott, a McGill University medical museum curator and disciple of famed doctor William Osler, the father of modern medical education. Denied admission to med school, Abbott nonetheless managed through sheer persistence to become the world's foremost expert on congenital heart deformity, publishing (in 1936, at age seventy) *The Atlas of Congenital Cardiac Disease*, a pioneering text in pediatric cardiology that Brownstein says "literally saved my life."

The story of advances in cardiac care moves forward via relentless resourcefulness and DIY improvisation. Vivien Thomas, known for fashioning spatulas for home cookouts out of surgical clamps, invented an array of specialized instruments specifically for pediatric cardiac surgery. The developers of a

HISTORIC COLLECTION/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

blood oxygenator to facilitate open-heart surgery jury-rigged the device using a dairy pump and a coil of beer-keg tubing. *The Open Heart Club* sets out to bolster your faith in medical science and in progress, especially the American, greatest-generation variety—hailing the advent of open-heart surgery in the 1950s, for example, as "a postwar American invention as miraculous as space travel." Brownstein provides a catalogue of innovations and breakthroughs: cardiac catheterization; heart-bypass surgery; the pacemaker; the implanted defibrillator. They all add up to a lot of lives saved. When the author was born, in the early 1960s, congenital heart disease was one of the top ten causes of death in the United States. Today, 85 percent of children with defects survive.

The costs of medical progress—the collateral damage caused by experimental surgeries—can be horrific, and breakthrough surgeons display an awful determination in pursuit of new techniques, undeterred by the staggering mortality involved. The promise of a greater benefit for future generations always tips the balance sheet. And living with an incurable congenital heart defect poses costs of its own. Brownstein writes insightfully about the long tradition of euphemism, denial, and avoidance on the topic, quoting Susan Sontag on the unmentionable nature of incurable disease and fleshing out the point with his own recollections. "I learned from an early age to disguise and deny my symptoms," he writes. Unlike many fellow patients, who in adulthood studiously avoid care, Brownstein submits himself, however reluctantly, to a lifetime of follow-up procedures. Yet disguise and denial are profoundly formative. "In refusing to acknowledge my condition, I had constructed a little prison for myself," he reflects; "I had no capacity for intimacy. I kept my fear secret.... With my family, the subject was taboo. The result was a stunted, shuttered emotional life."

The memoir part of *The Open Heart Club* chronicles Brownstein's effort—ultimately successful—to escape the prison of his anxious aloneness. Belatedly, he marries; becomes a father; lives life fully. But shadows remain. However upbeat its tale of progress, this book reverberates with fear, the daily dread brought by living beneath a cardiac sword of Damocles. Brownstein might feel fine, but he isn't fine, and deep down he knows it. "My leaking, failing heart was the monster under the bed." Finally venturing out from behind the wall of denial, he seeks medical counsel for a grossly enlarged right ventricle, one of several problems that typically afflict childhood heart-defect patients later in life. By the latter chapters, which detail the author's recurring episodes of V-tach, in which his heart uncontrollably races, the dread is contagious—at least to this sixty-one-year-old reader with his own (far less serious) heart issues. Tension continues right up through the final pages, in which the author has a new pulmonary valve, the Edwards Lifesciences Sapien III, installed—not through open-heart surgery, but via catheter, in yet another miraculous innovation.

Brownstein acknowledges his great good fortune in the "happenstance" of having been born at the foundational moment of pediatric cardiology. He was a child tetralogy sufferer at precisely the moment when surgeons figured out how to repair it. And his luck continued. "[E]very time my life has been in danger, doctors have come along and invented something to save me. I have surfed wave after wave of advances in heart surgery and in medical technology." *The Open Heart Club* doesn't address a problem implicit in its celebration of high-tech medicine—namely, that the American avidity for the glamorous cutting edge of medicine, for the sparkling and expensive technologies that enable dramatic interventions, has gone hand in hand with a notably flawed delivery of basic quality community care. But no reader will begrudge Brownstein for rejoicing at what in a very different context has been called "the blessing of the late birth." His story is one of highly serendipitous timing. Had he been born two decades earlier, he almost certainly would not have been around to write this moving and informative book.

As a writer Brownstein is cheerful, self-deprecating, and instructive. His prose is lucid; he's an able popular historian, and he weaves his own story in deftly—or should I say, stitches it in? The author himself is by no means above a mordant drollery or two ("My struggle is everyone's struggle: it's hard to know your own heart"). He relates how, at a meeting of the Adult Congenital Heart Association, attendees greet each other by listing their malfunctions. Tricuspid atresia, meet hypoplastic right heart syndrome! Brownstein also plays notes in mellower registers, as when he conveys his joy at being able to visit the surgeon who operated on him in childhood—fifty years ago.

A major point of arrival in this book is the recognition of how determinedly humans avoid facing the fact that sooner or later we will all get sick and die. "Well-insured, lucky, and cushioned from sickness, we do our jobs and dance at weddings and make love to our spouses and yell at our children as if the next trip to the hospital isn't just around the corner," he observes. "But we're kidding ourselves." For Brownstein, this is a constantly astonishing reality. Yet faith, and certainly Christian faith, *begins* from the assumption of defect, illness, and death. The spiritual dimension to this book is minimal; while Brownstein admires those who are open to religious consolation and trust in a higher power, he confesses that "I don't have the gift for it"; the metaphysical backdrop to this account of his lifelong struggle is an abiding intuition of personal oblivion. And yet, his own agnosticism notwithstanding, Brownstein's cycles of travail and recovery ignite, again and again, small detonations of gratitude and wonder. "I felt it all so keenly," he writes; "the miracle of everything."

RAND RICHARDS COOPER *is* Commonweal*'s contributing editor.*

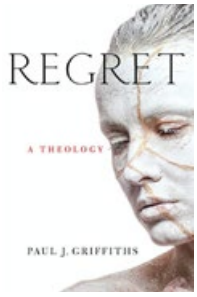
Sorry for Your Loss

JONATHAN MALESIC

When the Catholic theologian and *Commonweal* contributor Paul J. Griffiths resigned from his faculty position at Duke Divinity School in 2017 following a conflict over an anti-racism workshop, his colleague Thomas Pfau told the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, "I profoundly regret his decision and, indeed, have conveyed to him that I regard it as a mistake." Pfau's statement—that he regrets something another person did—is a grammatical oddity, a bit like the semi-apology, "I'm sorry for your loss." We say things like this all the time, and we understand what they mean as long as we don't analyze them too carefully.

In his new book, *Regret: A Theology*, Griffiths performs just such an analysis on a range of statements about regret, many of them drawn from literary works, in an effort to see what Christians can say about the topic. Regret, to Griffiths, is not just one thing but a spectrum of "otherwise-attitudes," epitomized in the statement, "I would it were otherwise." The spectrum begins with lament, sorrow over the state of things, though lament is not quite a species of regret because it does not necessarily wish things otherwise. Beyond lament are remorse, contrition, confession, and penance. Penance—particularly sacramental penance—is the "culmination" of these attitudes that together are indispensable to Christian life. "Someone who has no regrets is someone not fully human and not much formed as a Christian," Griffiths writes.

The heart of sacramental penance is being sorry for *your own* sins. That's why regret on behalf of another's actions is so conceptually strange. But Griffiths argues that you can regret something you are not responsible for because you have a degree of solidarity with the person who is. Parents regret the actions of their children, Americans today regret the actions of their forebears, and so on. You can even regret the extinction of the dinosaurs, even though no human is to blame. (Griffiths contends that the dinosaurs died because of the sins of angels, with whom humans have solidarity as fellow creatures.) Solidarity as a fellow scholar, a colleague, or a friend may well have been the source of Pfau's regret on Griffiths's behalf. Perhaps he wished he could have undone Griffiths's decision himself, like an anxious parent who grabs the steering wheel from his teenage child, willing the otherwise into being. Or maybe Pfau was only lamenting a loss. (Griffiths does not comment on his departure from Duke in this book.)



REGRET
A Theology

PAUL J. GRIFFITHS
University of Notre Dame Press
$30 | 152 pp.

The explanation for why it's possible to regret the demise of prehistoric species, or what someone else has done, is one of this book's many fruitful insights about a feeling our culture says we must avoid. Even theologians have rarely addressed this topic. (At least, not in terms like Griffiths's; more on that in a moment.) Griffiths begins with a puzzle from Scripture: How can we understand God's evident regret over making Saul king (1 Sam 15:11), given that Christians believe God exists outside of time? He answers by showing how Christians have to speak of God in two registers, the metaphysical and the historical. In the latter register, God's intimate relationship with humanity entails responding to our actions. As they change, so does his judgment. In another chapter, Griffiths meditates on the notion of *felix culpa*, highlighting that regrettable events, such as a failed marriage, nevertheless often include non-regretted felicities, such as children. We shouldn't weigh felicities against faults, but rather allow the good to "transfigur[e]" the things we wish otherwise.

I was once a theology professor, too. I resigned a tenured position both because I had burned out and to move with my wife for her new job. My regret over my career is complicated. I wish the job had been different: less taxing, more rewarding. I wish I had been a better scholar and thus a stronger candidate for jobs elsewhere. I wish I hadn't

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merged my identity with my work. I sometimes regret going into academia at all, but when I consider the felicities that trailed that decision—friendships, accomplishments, the joy of seeing students learn—I also regret leaving it.

This act of wishing my career otherwise is what Griffiths calls remorse, the "deformed sibling" of the other forms of regret. Remorse, he asserts, feels like rats chewing at your flesh. (The word stems from the Latin *mordere*, "to bite.") The problem with remorse is its self-focus, according to Griffiths. It is hopeless dwelling on your own suffering. This is why, in a poem Griffiths analyzes, Emily Dickinson named remorse the "Adequate of Hell." We need to get past our own pain, he contends, and become contrite for the pain we have caused others.

I'm not sure anything beyond remorse is possible when it comes to a lost career, though. The higher forms of regret—contrition, confession, and penance—don't quite fit such a case. Sure, I was unkind to colleagues and students while I worked as a professor, and those wrongs demanded atonement. But I don't need to apologize for embarking on the career in the first place, or for quitting. My regret is not about finding and removing the obstacles between me and other people, or between me and God, which is for Griffiths the whole point of confession. Rather, my regret is a part of removing obstacles between

my past and present selves. By thinking counterfactually about my past, I am not just wallowing in bygone pain but looking for continuities between it and the present. I am looking for who I might have become but never did. And in doing so, I hope to find the thread of who I am.

Our culture's strong bias against regret arises from our perpetual drive to cut that thread. Just look at our recent president, a man who claimed he never sought forgiveness for any sins. To him, and often to the rest of us, the past is all sunk cost. Our one task is to survey present conditions and then act to our advantage. Survey, then act, always looking ahead. As a result, our past selves are alien to us. Regret, including the kind that terminates in remorse, knits the old and new selves together. It gets you to recognize your solidarity with a stranger: the stranger you were, who was thoughtless or malicious or whose life was just complexly unsatisfying. Making those connections enlarges the self; it's a necessary component of moral growth.

Griffiths's account makes good sense of regret over the kind of actions Catholics are supposed to confess: acts of personal moral wrongdoing. Indeed, he thinks that in the sacrament of penance, we need only confess the general category of sin—theft, adultery, envy—and not get too deep into specifics. Our desire to narrate "the gorgeous detail of our sense of ourselves as the center of the cosmos… is an artifact of the Fall, and bringing it to nothing is, in essence, what confession's avowal does."

This is good advice for the sacrament (if nothing else, it keeps the line to the confessional moving), but not for our larger project of moral development through self-narration. That may not matter to Griffiths, because for him, "The linear model [of time], commonsensical though it may seem, is incorrect." Cyclical, liturgical time alone is "real." But we leave the booth and go out into the world, having vowed to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin. Sometimes, by the grace of God, we even do a bit better. Linear time may be unreal, but it's a useful fiction. It allows us to say, "I won't break this promise like I did the last one."

Griffiths's focus on sacramental penance also makes it hard to say what we should think about failings both smaller and larger than the ones we confess through the screen. Our days are filled with small errors, from burnt toast to wrong turns to forgotten bill payments. They are regrettable, yet they paradoxically also constitute our character. At the other end of the scale, Griffiths takes an overly modest view of what it means for Christians to do penance for the structural violence and exploitation they are involved in as citizens of nation-states. Following Augustine's outlook in *The City of God*, Griffiths writes that "the inhabitants of the LORD's city learn, over time and always imperfectly, to lament their implication in and inextricability from the violence that marks the human city." Beyond that, they can hope and pray for God to "deliver" them from these conditions, recognizing "that such delivery won't come until the end."

But we can do more than just lament social sin. What Griffiths says about individual faults—that words and actions can "transfigur[e] the past" and bring it "into the divine economy of the gift"—is also true of violent and unjust social realities. We can put otherwise-thinking into hopeful action. True, I am in no position to change U.S. foreign policy, but in communion with others, I can make local headway against structural evils like racism.

Recent theologians have said little about regret, but they have said quite a bit about repentance. For example, my friend Jennifer McBride places "confession unto repentance" in public life at the core of Christian discipleship in her 2012 book, *The Church for the World*. McBride anchors her vision of repentant discipleship in Protestant Christology. "Through the crucifixion," she writes, "God takes responsibility for sin and makes right for eternity all that is not." To follow Christ, then, is to acknowledge your complicity in societal injustice and then, as a consequence of that metanoia, to work in solidarity with others to end it.

Does regret play a role in such repentance? Did John the Baptist call for regret, for adopting an otherwise-attitude, in his preaching? This is where Griffiths could have said much more in this short book, even within the bounds of his "grammatical" aim "to write what can be written about wishing things otherwise using the lexicon and syntax provided me by a particular construal of the Christian-theological archive." Part of the trouble is that Griffiths does not say what his "particular construal" of the archive is. He cites very few theological sources explicitly, instead training his attention on passages from poets and novelists: Paul Celan, Henry James, Jane Austen, and George Herbert among them. Granted, Griffiths has written multiple books on theological method, but it seems unfair to expect non-specialist readers to know them. It is frustrating that a writer as skilled as Griffiths leaves his methods obscure in *Regret*; would that it were otherwise.

In the book's preface (a nearly-verbatim repeat of the preface in his 2018 book, *Christian Flesh*), Griffiths writes that theology first of all must respond to God. After that, "it should seek to be interesting." *Regret* certainly is. Griffiths's writing often prompts disagreement, his interlocutors frequently calling him "provocative." American culture and the Catholic Church do not have well-formed theories about regret, and those who live by the "no regrets" maxim are unlikely to read this book, so it may not spur a vehement debate. The conversation it provokes may be quieter than what Griffiths has provoked in the past, but we need it nevertheless.

JONATHAN MALESIC *is a writer living in Dallas. His book on burnout will be published this fall by University of California Press.*

The Pascal of the North

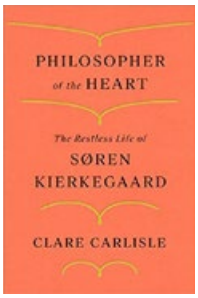
GORDON MARINO

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), a hybrid poet, theologian, and philosopher, widely regarded as the Ur-existentialist, argued that there is no riskier strategy in life than being risk-averse. In this, the eighth large-scale biography of the Danish firebrand, Clare Carlisle takes a number of authorial risks. For one, some of the book is written in the present tense and as though Carlisle were in the room with Kierkegaard, as in this scene: "The house is still, and he stands by the tall window looking out at Nytorv, smoke rising from his pipe. On this clear night the wide square is silvery and shadowy in the moonlight." These mood-setting word paintings will evoke a "give me a break" from some, but will enliven the text for others.

In another daring move, Carlisle's life of Kierkegaard does not follow a chronological order but instead marches along according to themes. On page one, we encounter Kierkegaard in his twenties; about fifty pages later, Carlisle begins to unveil Kierkegaard's bizarre childhood. Those already familiar with an author sometimes referred to as the "Pascal of the North" will not be fazed by the temporal switchbacks; these might, however, prove mildly disorienting to those new to Kierkegaard. Still, Carlisle's penetrating glimpses into Kierkegaard the person, her textual insights, and her concise and well-placed accounts of Kierkegaard's relation to thinkers who inspired and/or riled him should compensate for any possible confusion.

SUEDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG PHOTO/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Søren Kierkegaard



PHILOSOPHER OF THE HEART
The Restless Life of Søren Kierkegaard

CLARE CARLISLE
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
$30 | 368 pp.

Kierkegaard's main aim as a writer was to enhance the inwardness of his readers; at the same time, he took a perverse if not sinful pride in his successful efforts to hide his own inner life. Even on his deathbed, he was pleased to think that no one had discovered the secret engine behind his monumental oeuvre. Of all his biographers, Carlisle, a professor at King's College London, deserves the laurels for penetrating the heart of this "philosopher of the heart."

That heart was riven by one of philosophy's strangest love stories. Kierkegaard became engaged to Regine Olsen in 1840, but a little over a year later, for reasons he never fully explained, he broke off the engagement. Nevertheless, he remained smitten with Regine for the remainder of his life. Even though she married Frederik Schlegel in 1847, Kierkegaard named Regine the sole beneficiary in his will. Mining Kierkegaard's mountainous journal entries and an interview with Regine that she gave after her husband's death, Carlisle artfully charts the ongoing effect of Kierkegaard's feelings for the woman he considered to be his partner in eternity.

Biographers have largely failed to capture the war between Kierkegaard's desire for recognition and his goal of walking the path of a self-denying Christian, but Carlisle brings this struggle to life. Throughout his writings, Kierkegaard maintained that the only way to live spiritually was "to die to this world" of trivial concerns and constant comparisons. And yet, there can be no doubt that for most of his life, Kierkegaard was dying to be accepted by the Danish literati. In fact, he would sink into a dudgeon when highbrow critics ignored or rebuffed him. Ironically, in one of his journal entries Kierkegaard praises Schopenhauer's genius, but laughs at the German philosopher's pique at having failed to win a prize in an essay contest. Kierkegaard should have taken a look in the mirror.

His life was one long meditation on faith. Born into a wealthy and pious Copenhagen family, Kierkegaard would become to Lutheranism something like what Luther had been to Catholicism. Although he read Luther religiously, by the fifth act of his brief life he was chastising Luther for his worldliness.

Carlisle helpfully summarizes Kierkegaard's assessment of Luther: "Luther's reforms coupled worldliness and religion in ways that suited the secular mentality already creeping into Europe."

Kierkegaard's work teems with puzzles and paradoxes. For example, why, given his Lutheranism, is there so little mention of grace in his writing? By way of explanation, Carlisle draws our attention to this passage from Kierkegaard's *Journals*:

> Christianity has been taken in vain, made too mild, so that people have forgotten what grace is. The more rigorous Christianity is, the more grace becomes manifest as a grace and not a sort of human sympathy.

Perhaps the idea is that it is only when we have tried to live a Christian life in all its rigor— when we have come not only to understand but to *feel* that we are sinners—that we can legitimately invoke the idea of amazing grace without presumption.

Lately, Kierkegaard has been threatened with "cancelation," not only because of his backward views on women and his failure to protest instances of anti-Semitism, but also because of his silence on the Danish slave trade, which was hotly debated in his time. The trade was abolished in 1792 but, as Carlisle notes, the "decree took over a decade to come into effect, and slavery itself continued in far-off colonies through the first half of the nineteenth century—long enough to secure the rise of the bourgeoisie." Kierkegaard's own father, a wool merchant, profited from slavery and the slave trade.

What did the moralist Kierkegaard have to say about this moral outrage? Nothing. Kierkegaard berated the bourgeoisie for their tendency to hide in the crowd and avoid speaking up. In his magnum opus, *The Sickness Unto Death*, written under the pen name of Anti-Climacus, Kierkegaard observes that the all-too-common wisdom of the day is to keep one's mouth shut unless one is absolutely sure of what one is about to say. Kierkegaard, like his hero Socrates, warns that when we remain mum we deprive ourselves of an opportunity to have our mistaken views corrected—if they are indeed mistaken. And yet, this champion of intellectual courage never lifted his super-charged quill to protest against slavery. The silence is hard to fathom.

Carlisle insists that Kierkegaard did not see himself as a reformer. Notwithstanding his barrage of criticisms of the Danish State Church, he steadfastly refused to become involved in reform movements. "Kierkegaard's sole concern is the spiritual life of 'the single individual.' He believes this to be 'diametrically opposite to politics,' since it has nothing to do with 'earthly reward, power, honor.'" Carlisle continues, "The louder the public clamor about these things, the more decisively he sets himself against them."

Near the end of his life, Kierkegaard did take to the ramparts, publicly proclaiming that the kind of Christianity practiced in Denmark was not Christianity at all. Because of his use of pseudonyms, it is sometimes hard to identify what Kierkegaard himself really means to say, and harder still to track the evolution of his thinking over time. One thing is clear: his views on what it means to be a Christian were always developing. He eventually arrived at the firm position that to follow Jesus is to imitate Jesus. You can't have your luxurious lake house and bear your cross too! During the last three years of his life, Kierkegaard launched a public assault on Christendom, maintaining that if the world is patting you on the back, you can be sure that you are headed in the wrong direction. He insisted that Christianity is nothing short of revolutionary. And he believed that when it comes to "equality," there is only one true form—equality before God. Or as Kierkegaard emphatically puts it: "Before God every person is equally important, without reservation equally important." (Perhaps this child of privilege would have been less contemptuous of more material versions of equality had he ever had to do a day's labor.)

For all the virtues of this book, I feel compelled to quibble with Carlisle's claim that Kierkegaard was ambivalent about Christianity. I wouldn't put it that way. For Kierkegaard, drawing on the Gospels, true faith entails the risk of taking offense. You may be able to remove or at least reduce this risk by treating religion as if it were only a solid foundation for morality; but then you'd have nothing left but human doctrines, which do not require the new organ of belief that is faith. Religion without faith is popular with those who need some kind of system to secure their identity but who demand to be exempt from having to trust in the unseeable and, above all, from having to obey a will other than their own.

Kierkegaard is commonly mistaken as an "irrationalist" in part because he was adamant that faith is an offense to reason. For Kierkegaard, "where there is certainty there is no faith." Also: where there is no risk, there is no faith. It is a Grand Canyon leap of faith to commit oneself to belief in a story as offensive to reason as the Gospel. Kierkegaard, under all his pseudonyms, proclaims that faith is something that both attracts and repels. We call Abraham the Father of Faith in large part because of his willingness to sacrifice his son at God's bidding, an offense to secular reason and ethics if ever there was one.

As Carlisle explains, Kierkegaard believed that Danish Lutheranism was worse than paganism. At least pagans owned their disbelief, but Kierkegaard's brethren domesticated Christianity to the point where the Good News was all about dancing around the Christmas tree. Plying the concept of offense, Kierkegaard aimed to make faith possible again by making plain how impossibly difficult it is. Carlisle's relative silence on the concept of offense aside, this elegantly written biography delivers fresh insights into the life and thought of the enigmatic Pascal of the north.

GORDON MARINO, *professor emeritus and director of the Hong Kierkegaard Library at St. Olaf College, is the author of* The Existentialist's Survival Guide: How to Live Authentically in an Inauthentic Age *(HarperOne)*.

THERE AND HERE

Marjorie Power

I fall from my own hands.
—A. Molotkov

I had a father who had no guns. Nor did he use the word guns.
Each autumn he'd tell me, Don't play in the woods.
Wait until hunting season ends.

Once, before I was born, my father bought a house.
Our home on a hill at the edge of the woods.

These days, at the edge of my life, there's a man who says,
You should write a poem about that. Not the home I mentioned
or its autumns. He wants me to write about misplaced keys,
seeing my dentist, vegetable stands by the roadside in Oregon.

Good subjects, I reply. You need to write your own stuff.

My childhood home was not for sale
when my father purchased it. He knocked on a door
and encountered the owner, gun in hand, a solitary senior
who was soothed into listening, laying aside, letting go.

The seller had never lived any place but there.

The man who wants me to write his poems has lived in two places,
there and here. There, everyone in town kept guns but no one
dreamt of shooting a neighbor. Here, it's populous and sprawly
with artists and other god-only-knows. But he likes me.

Or did until I mentioned how my father conducted business.

Two Places called me divisive, stormed off to his cabinet to brood.
I wish he'd unlock it and lift out his fear, stock by barrel by gleam.

It's good to forge poems from the molten steel of fear.
I go visit the man at the edge of the woods
who has never lived any place but there.

MARJORIE POWER'*s newest poetry chapbook,* Refuses to Suffocate, *was just released in Volume VII of the Delphi series from Blue Lyra Press. Her newest full-length collection is* Oncoming Halos *(Kelsay Books). Journals that have recently published her work include* Southern Poetry Review, Mudfish, *and the* Comstock Review. *She can be found at www.marjoriepowerpoet.com.*

CARMEN M. NANKO-FERNÁNDEZ

Béisbol, Baseball, and 'Bad Hombres'

The long relationship between the game and the border

Fans of professional baseball in the United States have long been fascinated by the asterisk (*). The symbol signals a condition out of the ordinary or one requiring clarification. It may be born out of an obsession for purity, rooted in a fondness for statistics and records, as well as for equity, or concealed in baseball's contorted relationship with what exactly defines cheating. Though it does *not* appear in record books, the asterisk lives in the popular imagination, ranking right up there with unicorns and the Loch Ness monster. Last year, Baseball Hall of Fame historian John Thorn opined to *New York Post* sportswriter Mike Vaccaro that "the sprinkling of asterisks is a matter best left to one's own conscience and understanding." The appeal to conscience underscores a tendency among baseball insiders to insist on using the asterisk when a beloved record is threatened or when the sport is tarnished by an accomplishment perceived as unfairly achieved.

Among the great "asterisk" narratives is the one concerning the single-season home-run record, first set by Babe Ruth with sixty in 1927, then surpassed by Roger Maris with sixty-one in 1961, and set anew by Barry Bonds in 2001 with seventy-three. Between Maris and Bonds came the race between Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa, which consumed the 1998 and 1999 seasons. McGwire hit seventy homers in 1998, while the Dominican-born Sosa struck sixty-six, becoming the first Latino, first Black, and first international player to break both Ruth's and Maris's records. (Sosa hit another sixty-three in 1999.)

By the logic of those eager to dispense them, the entire list of home-run leaders deserves a giant asterisk. The legacies of McGwire, Sosa, and Bonds are tainted by allegations they used performance-enhancing drugs. Maris's accomplishment was famously contested on the basis of his having played after baseball extended the length of its season to 162 games from 154, when Ruth played. (Indeed, this is where the myth of the asterisk began—a myth debunked in a 2011 article by journalist Allen Barra. There was never an asterisk next to Maris's name.) But Ruth had an advantage that is rarely acknowledged. The exclusion of Black players from the major leagues until 1947 meant he did not have to face some of the best pitchers of his time who played primarily in the Negro Leagues. Nor did Ruth have to compete with sluggers like Josh Gibson who, according to some, holds the record with eight-four credited homers over 170 games in 1936.

It's no surprise that asterisk fever reemerged in a season abbreviated by COVID-19, especially when the postseason included two teams with losing records, the Milwaukee Brewers and the Houston Astros (who are still under the shadow of a 2017 sign-stealing scandal). Some feel that annotating the sixty-game 2020 season with an asterisk would highlight the distinctive challenges faced, honoring resilience and survival in difficult circumstances. Others worry about the integrity of records or the elevation of mediocrity in a shortened season.

Just as Major League Baseball's postseason play was coinciding with the closing weeks of the national-election campaign last fall, Showtime premiered *Bad Hombres*. The documentary by Andrew Glazer follows the world's only binational professional baseball team, the Tecolotes de los Dos Laredos, a triple-A team in la Liga Mexicana de Béisbol. The Tecos play in home stadiums on each side of the border, one in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico, and the other in Laredo, Texas, U.S.A. The film focuses on the 2019 season, with particular attention to three players: two Mexican Americans, catcher Luis Flores from Texas and infielder Juan Martinez,

Luis Flores in *Bad Hombres*

a California-born son of immigrants; and rookie backup catcher Cristian Mejía Herrera from Sinaloa, Mexico. From a baseball perspective, there is nothing particularly remarkable about this season, in which the Tecos finished in fifth place in their division with a 60-60 record, or about the players featured in the documentary. According to the team stats, Mejía appeared in only twenty-two games, half of them as pinch hitter. Flores left the team in July to take a job as a high-school baseball coach. These storylines alone are insufficient to carry the film, and they are not developed in a way that inspires a viewer's emotional investment.

The central character in *Bad Hombres* is really the border. *Béisbol* is an entry point to a border parable, and *la frontera* is the star. The film tells a tale of navigating violence. On the Mexican side, this is represented by drug cartels and their lookouts; on the U.S. side, by the ominous presence of President Donald Trump and the empowered Customs and Border Protection. On the U.S. side, the story is told from the perspectives of environmental and political activists, of Catholic Charities ministering to detained migrants and separated families, and of CBP. All of these are primarily Latino and Latina voices. On the Mexican side, the drama is communicated through image and sound, mostly threatening and militarized, with a soundtrack of gunfire and alarms.

Glazer is not the first filmmaker to title a border documentary after the words made infamous by Trump in a campaign debate (2016), in phone threats to a Mexican counterpart (2017), in tweets (2019), and in jokes (2019). Mexican cinematographer Rodrigo Ruiz Patterson and social-science professor Juan Antonio del Monte Madrigal directed another documentary called *Bad Hombres*, which has been making the rounds of film festivals since the fall of 2019. (The shared title highlights Trump's lexicon of racialized pejoratives and his nefarious branding of people and countries deemed threats to the making of America's greatness.) The project was born out of del Monte's ethnographic fieldwork with people who had been deported and were living as transient and homeless in the shadow of the wall at the northern border of Mexico, planning their next crossing attempt. The film has been described as "*una marginalidad que también tiene su atisbo de resistencia*," marginality with a touch of resistance. In light of American zero-tolerance policies, the directors depict the complexity and multiple vulnerabilities associated with border crossings without victimizing or glorifying migrants—"*sin victimizarlos, pero sin glorificarlos*," as reviewer Andreína Longoria put it.

Glazer is also not the first to tell the story of los Tecolotes. Dating back to 1935, the team has had three periods of playing as a binational franchise: 1985–1994, 1996–2003, and 2018–2020. Anthropologist Alan Klein chronicled the Tecos in his 1997 study *Baseball on the Border: A Tale of Two Laredos*. For three decades Klein has produced a rich body of accessible scholarship specializing in sport, society, and culture, from his 1991 exploration of Dominican baseball in *Sugarball* to his 2020 consideration of basketball on the Pine Ridge Reservation in *Lakota Hoops*. For Klein, the Tecos are a study in nationalism in all of its dimensions, as well as participants in the border's concomitant tensions of belonging and otherness. His critical attention to the attitudes and relationships on the team between the Mexican nationals and the limited number of permitted "importados," primarily from the United States, underscores a major lacuna in Glazer's *Bad Hombres*.

At their 2018 binational reconfiguration, the Tecos benefitted from a 2016 rule change that expanded the definition of "native Mexican" to include Mexican-American players who could provide the proof of ances-

COURTESY OF SHOWTIME

In Mexico these Mexican-American ballplayers are Americans, regarded as unregulated usurpers threatening jobs of native-born peloteros.

try necessary to secure a Mexican passport. It is estimated that in 2019, the season covered by *Bad Hombres,* at least 30 percent of la Liga Mexicana de Béisbol were Mexican Americans now considered to be domestic rather than foreign players. A look at the Tecos fifty-player roster indicates at least fifteen Latinos were part of the 2019 season. It is likely that the majority, if not all, were Mexican Americans. The *importados* included under the limit hailed from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, the United States, and Venezuela.

The amended rule redefining Mexican eligibility made the entire league essentially binational. In his 2019 article, "Home and Away: American Ballplayers Are Flooding the Mexican League," journalist Joseph Bien-Kahn draws attention to another border team in the league, the Tijuana Toros. While los Toros do not have stadiums on both sides of *la frontera*, the team is composed of a majority of "northern imports; Mexicans by the letter, but not the spirit, of the law." While Mexican by redefinition, in Mexico these Mexican-American ballplayers are Americans, regarded as unregulated usurpers threatening jobs of native-born *peloteros*. The timing of the change coincided with the Trump administration's growing antagonism toward immigrants and increasingly aggressive actions at the southern U.S. border.

Bad Hombres did not need baseball as a hook to highlight border issues. *Béisbol* is a border and migration narrative on its own terms. Toward the end of the film, Glazer constructs comparative tension by cross-cutting scenes of a CBP nighttime operation against border-crossers with a Tecos night game in which the team is trying to keep slim playoff hopes alive. The parallel is elusive. Is it his point that both are games, or is Tecos baseball a metaphor for border crossings by desperate migrants? The end result is a disjointed storyline that is neither a sufficiently developed treatment of border realities nor a compelling example of sport documentary as social and political critique. From the perspective of Mexican baseball, it reflects an observation made by Klein that "the border has been able to prevent Americans from ever realizing the rich tapestry that has been woven in the country to the south.... Mexican League baseball has never really been thought of as anything but an elephant's graveyard, where ballplayers who can't quit on their own (with dignity) go to die."

The story Glazer missed became even more relevant with the December 2020 decision of Major League Baseball to finally recognize, as many have long known, that the caliber of play in the Negro Leagues was major-league quality. The implications of this decision may well toss all the "sacred" records into asterisk territory. In his biting commentary "MLB Elevating the Status of Negro Leagues is the Problem, not the Solution," columnist Clinton Yates cuts to the heart of one of the enduring problems in professional baseball in the United States, calling it "the most economically abusive sport in this country. Baseball is the sharecropping of American sports." It was the prospect of economic enhancement, racial inclusion, and better treatment that encouraged Black players from the Negro Leagues to spend time in la Liga Mexicana de Béisbol prior to the reintegration of Major League Baseball. But it is worth noting that the numbers posted during those seasons, like those of Josh Gibson in 1940 and 1941, will not count toward the amended statistics. Low salaries also left room for Mexican League owner Jorge Pasquel to successfully lure a few MLB players away from their teams in the mid-1940s despite the threat of lifetime bans. In Mexico, financial benefit incentivized colorline blindness for white ballplayers. Even to this day, Mexican Americans and U.S. *importados* who aren't on Major League rosters are drawn to play in the Mexican League by higher salaries and better lodgings and food on the road, as well as by the more affordable cost of living. In a 2018 interview with his hometown California newspaper, Juan Martinez, one of the Tecos ballplayers featured in *Bad Hombres*, explained: "The average player makes about $1,000 a month starting out in the minor leagues in the U.S. with the salary increasing about $100 per year.... In the Mexican League, most players make between $4,000 and $10,000 each month."

In the story of *béisbol*, at least since the 1930s, U.S. Americans are the migrant workers. Mexico, with a comparable professional league, was and remains a land of opportunity. In U.S. baseball, asterisks inhabit the intersections of race and migration. As a close and careful look at the long and complicated relationship between *béisbol* and the border reveals, *Bad Hombres* itself should also be viewed with an asterisk.

CARMEN M. NANKO-FERNÁNDEZ *is Professor of Hispanic Theology and Ministry and Director of the Hispanic Theology and Ministry Program at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. Her publications focus on areas of Latin@ theologies, Catholic social teaching, sport and theology, and the intersections between religion and popular culture with particular attention to* béisbol/*baseball.*

ASH WEDNESDAY

Sr. Lou Ella Hickman

I have come to light a fire on the earth
Luke 12:49

you are dust and to dust you shall return...
so why ashes
those sooty remains of palm branch holocausts
rather than dirt from a fertile field
or an empty back lot overrun with plants and weeds
to remind us that evil grows among the good
yet ashes proclaim this day of dust
a beginning
and a consummation
marking us with His dark, sacred solidarity

SR. LOU ELLA HICKMAN *'s poems and articles have appeared in numerous magazines and journals, as well as four anthologies. She was nominated for the Pushcart Prize in 2017 and 2020. Her first book of poetry,* she: robed and wordless, *was published in 2015 by Press 53.*

One by Fire, One by Prayer

NICOLE D'ENTREMONT

We were in the darkened cocoon of a fully booked transpacific flight from Narita, Japan, to Washington D.C. In the aisle seat next to me, David was slumped forward, the top of his head pressed against the back of the seat in front of him. The visor of his khaki baseball cap slanted over his eyes. I had never seen this airplane sleep posture before and thought, in light of the conversation we had been sharing on and off for about six hours, that maybe he knew something I didn't. Straightening up and stretching my arms, I arched my back and leaned forward, pressing my head against the seat in front of me. My shoulders and back felt relief, but I didn't drift off to sleep and eventually resumed my upright position staring at the illuminated bathroom sign over the bulkhead. Did I wonder, then, why David was sitting in economy? Surely he could have done better, given who he worked for and where he was going. It was a question I didn't ask him, although I suppose he would have answered.

I was returning home to Maine after spending three weeks in Vietnam with Habitat for Humanity—two weeks assisting with a building project in the Mekong Delta, plus an extra week with a school project unaffiliated with Habitat. It was my third trip in three years. I was tired physically, troubled by some of the things I had observed, and wondering whether this might be my last trip to the region. I was looking forward to a quiet flight and hoping my seatmates would not be talkative. But in the end, I was the one to start a conversation with David and, as I write these words weeks later, it's still buzzing in my head.

The economy section is, of course, the last one to fill up, and I hoped that through some magical intervention the aisle seat next to me would remain empty. The window seat had already been taken by a young man who had tucked himself in and was now resting his head against the window. I had not yet buckled up when a tall figure appeared in the aisle, stowed a pack in the overhead, and bowed down, indicating that the precious aisle seat was gone. He was a young man with a smile that reminded me of Denzel Washington in *Mississippi Masala*. We mumbled hellos and, settling in, began digging out the buckles and straps lodged in the crevices between our seats.

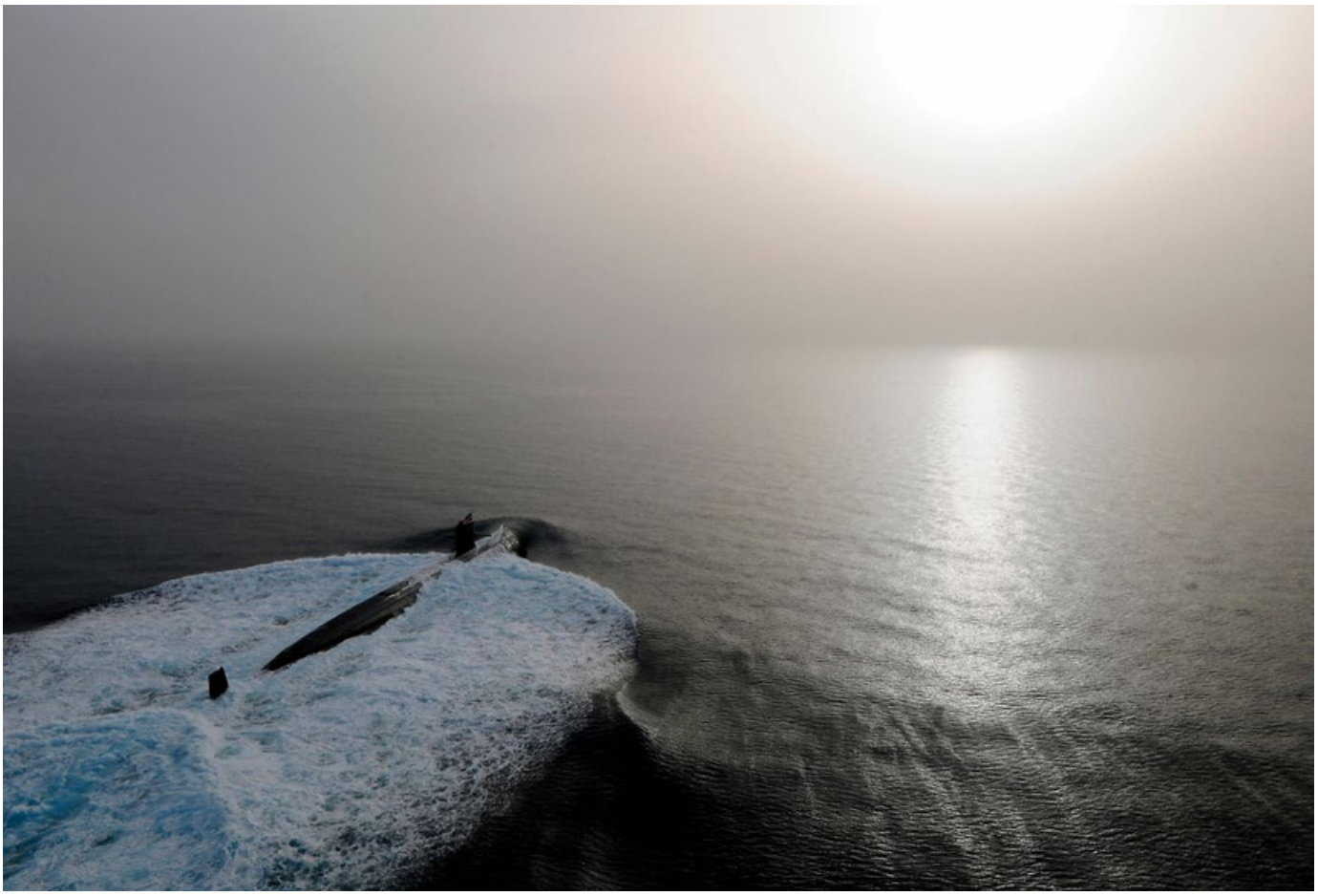
The plane was already airborne when I asked the first question. *Where was he going?* Washington Dulles. *Was that home?* No, work. A meeting. *Oh, the government?* Yes. Military. And then I said, "What do you think of your boss?" "Well, I can't talk about that," he replied. I said something like, "It must be hard to work for someone like that," and then we didn't talk about that person at all for the next twenty-odd hours. And so the rest of our day-and-night-long, crossing-the-international-date-line conversation began. What did we talk about?

The "Silent Service." David is an officer and serves on a nuclear submarine. He and his fellow submariners ship out on clandestine missions, around-the-clock surveillance, nuclear arms at the ready. He believes their presence is a deterrent to war. We talk about service. Duty to country. War. Religion. Empathy. Silence. Monasteries. Reading. Respect for commanders. Mission. Family. His generation. My generation. Life on a submarine. Close quarters. The necessity of speaking softly. Stealth. Sounds under water. Stress. Prayer. Keeping watch. Not drinking. Not smoking. What he could say, and what he couldn't.

How could I ever unpack this conversation in a short narrative, and why does it matter to me so much at this point in my life? First, I was shocked at how much I agreed with what he was saying, though I am against nuclear arms and war. My trips to Vietnam are partly an extension of my belief that the United States owes reparations to the Vietnamese people for our country's actions during the war. But, at the same time, I respected much of what David was saying about duty and service; strangely, I also saw a connection between his conception of service and vigilance and the life of the Benedictine monks at a monastery I sometimes visit. Certain words David used reminded me of the prayers that those monks say around the clock. It made for an eerie overlay of images.

How could this be? I learned the submarines stay six hundred feet beneath the surface of the sea. Like the monks, the submariners are vigilant and silent. When I first went to the monastery and walked outside after vigils, the prayer cycle where the monks keep watch during the darkest part of the night, I was startled to see before me a wide band of light glowing at the top of a mesa. I later learned that this shimmering iridescence came from ancient crustaceans lit by the overhead moon. They were embedded in the mesa from a time when all the land around me was submerged beneath the sea.

I think now of the monks' praying and chanting and holding vigil in the night; I think of the submariners gazing



The nuclear-powered attack submarine *USS Pittsburgh* during a surface transit in the Arabian Sea

US NAVY PHOTO/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

at the luminescent dials of their work stations, moving the ship silently, monitoring depth and trajectory, controlling the weapons, calibrating the systems. I think of the sleeping earth. I think of us. Are we safe or in peril? I think of one of the psalms recited during those hours: *You will not fear the terror of the night / nor the arrow that flieth by day.*

I learned from David that his missions sometimes lasted for one hundred and twenty days or more, in a hushed underwater environment with one-hundred-plus other service members in close quarters. They live a regulated life, charged with work that must be performed at regular intervals around the clock. The safety of the ship and crew depends on this work being done well. I respected the devotion to that duty as I respected the devotion of the monks who prayed around the clock. Both groups, I believe, feel they are defending a sleeping and vulnerable world from the terrors of the night and the arrows that fly by day.

I asked David if he was raised Catholic. I had my suspicions. He was. I asked him what his mother thought about his chosen profession; he said she had wanted him to be a priest.

David talked a lot about empathy, about knowing when another man was having a hard time, seeing something in his eye or body language. The necessity of listening. In our long and intermittent conversation, empathy was mentioned more than once. At one point I asked him about the morality of nuclear weapons. He felt they were a necessary deterrent to hostile nations. Our country had to have the best weapons at the ready. I countered that so did the other countries. There always had to be a big stick involved, and then a bigger stick, and then an even bigger one. And where has that gotten us? I remember only silence after that exchange.

But this is not an essay about the morality of war; it's a reflection on service to a higher calling. Do we as ordinary citizens not bound by oaths to country or religion have a mission or a duty to serve the wider community? Do we have a social expectation of engagement, one that we treat not as an extraneous burden but as something to be honored and encouraged? I saw in David someone who was not embarrassed to use those words: *Duty. Mission. Service*. Are these words now considered too naïve and old-fashioned, even dangerous? Maybe the question is itself naïve. Or maybe I need an answer.

NICOLE D'ENTREMONT *is the author of two novels:* City of Belief *and* A Generation of Leaves. *She wrote for and worked with the New York City Catholic Worker during the 1960s and lives on Peaks Island, Maine.*

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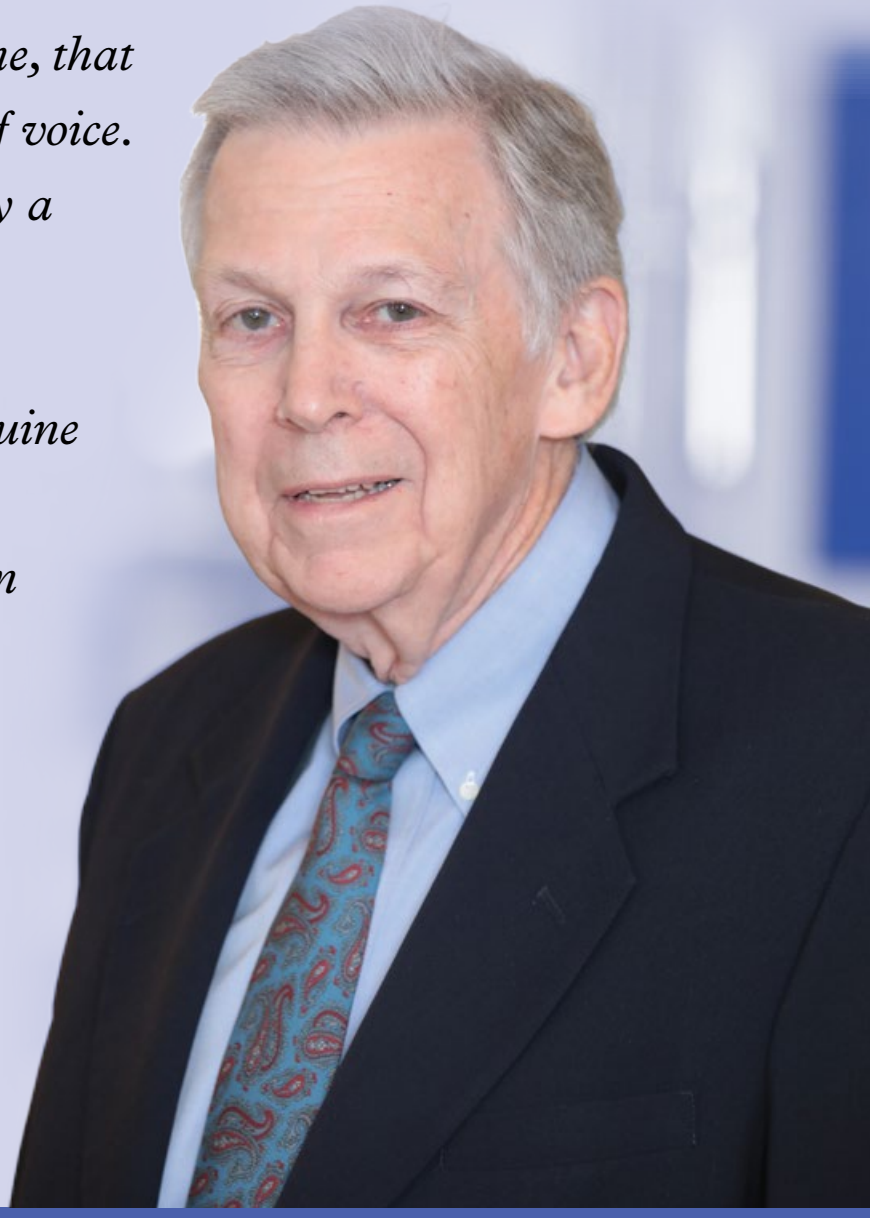
— DAN MURTAUGH
Co-Chair, the Edward Skillin Society



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