Religion, Politics, Culture

Commonweal

FEBRUARY 2022

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Art & Idolatry

Jeff Reimer

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Hans Joas's defense of the sacred

Susan McWilliams Barndt on
Ross Douthat & the mysteries of illness

Luke Timothy Johnson on
his years as a Benedictine monk

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Head of Christ, style of Rembrandt, c. 1650s (Mr. and Mrs. Isaac D. Fletcher Collection, Bequest of Isaac D. Fletcher, 1917/The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

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LETTERS

Pragmatism, Ukraine, and the meaning of sex

PRAGMATISM & DEMOCRACY

George Scialabba's review of the new collection of Richard Rorty's lectures ("Should Philosophy Retire?," December) seems to me to be as glib as Rorty himself. If the view that Scialabba attributes to Rorty and that Rorty attributes to John Dewey were correct, then undoubtedly "philosophy should retire." But there is a tell. Scialabba writes, "Pragmatism does not entail or enjoin; it is, [Rorty] acknowledged, 'neutral between Hitler and Jefferson.'" Readers who know Dewey will know that it would have been impossible for him to write this sentence. And it would be the best reason not to mistake Rorty for Dewey's philosophical heir. To cite just a few well-known titles, Dewey is the author of *Democracy and Education* (1916), *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), *Individualism Old and New* (1930), and *Liberalism and Social Action* (1935). His philosophy centers on "democracy as a way of life." "Neutral between Hitler and Jefferson" would be just the wrong thing to say about him in 2021.

Tom Jeannot
Spokane, Wash.

GEORGE SCIALABBA REPLIES:

On page 50 of *Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism*, Rorty is discussing "Dewey's idea that we are special because we can take charge of our evolution, take ourselves in directions which have neither precedent nor justification in either biology or history." This, he contends, is "the idea common to Emerson and Whitman, the idea of a new, self-creating community, united not by knowledge of the same truths but by sharing the same inclusivist, democratic hopes. The idea of communal self-creation, of realizing a dream which has no justification in unconditional claims to universal validity, sounds suspicious to Habermas and Apel because they naturally associate it with Hitler. It sounds better to Americans, because they naturally associate it with Jefferson, Whitman, and Dewey. The moral to be drawn, I think, is that this suggestion is neutral between Hitler and Jefferson."

Rorty's point is that the rhetoric of self-creation can serve invidious ends as well as admirable ones. So can most other rhetorics. To say that either Dewey or Rorty was "neutral between Hitler and Jefferson" is of course absurd. To say that there were metaphors and other tropes, characteristic tones and registers, dialectical moves, and other imaginative and expository techniques in pragmatists' writing that could have served either Hitler or Jefferson, either democrats or fascists, is not at all absurd, nor at all discreditable.

Did I extrapolate rashly in my review from "this suggestion" to "pragmatism," arousing Tom Jeannot's understandable ire? Yes, probably. Apologies.

STEPS FOR PEACE IN UKRAINE

The solution the editors propose to the Ukrainian crisis is flawed in analysis and resolution ("The Standoff in Ukraine," January). Calling for the implementation of the Minsk II agreements is a good idea but it merely brings to the fore two paramount issues, at least, that must be addressed. First, the illegal presence of Russian forces that have invaded the Donbas. Second, the question of what kind of autonomy the region might be granted. A point of clarification: NATO is not an offensive but a defensive alliance. The Eastern European states that joined the alliance so eagerly after the fall of the Soviet empire did so not because they had designs on Russia but to protect themselves against their justified fear of Russian power. A Russia that effectively subdued Ukraine might well turn its pressure on the Baltic states, which are also seen as "lost territories," and could do so by using the large Russian populations transported into their territories under the Soviets as a lever against them.

However, it might be possible to bar the door permanently to NATO membership for Ukraine under the following

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University of Dayton

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LETTERS

conditions: a) Russia evacuate and surrender all control in Donbas; b) the Crimean peninsula, illegally conquered by Russia, be returned to Ukraine; c) any autonomy granted to Donbas must not be so extensive as to allow the area to be able to unilaterally veto Kiev's policies, effectively creating an independent state that would be under the domination of Russia; d) NATO and Russia guarantee the independence of Ukraine, allowing it to apply for EU membership if it wished; and e) all sides agree to restore the postwar principle that military conquest of neighboring states is illicit. These steps could lead to actual peace; anything less will reward the aggressor, its appetite for conquest will grow, and we will face the danger of more and worse conflicts in the future.

Mario D. Mazzarella
Newport News, Va.

TO EXPERIENCE REVERENTLY

"I know just the book you need to read!" was my response to B. D. McClay's review of Amia Srinivasan's book *The Right to Sex* ("Clearing the Field," December). In response to McClay's statement—"What I do want is an exploration of what makes sex special, of the distinctive morality that applies to desire and pleasure"—I suggest Ronald Rolheiser's book *The Holy Longing*. It is a deeply thoughtful and comprehensive treatment of that question. Far from being "bound in advance to reach certain conclusions," Rolheiser looks at the very words we use to describe sex, love, and desire, laying out a very "sex-positive" Christian sexuality. A Christian sexuality "is a beautiful, good, extremely powerful, sacred energy given to us by God...to move [us] toward unity and consummation with that which is beyond us." Rolheiser takes issue with framing chastity in sexual terms. It is that, he acknowledges, but so much more: "To be chaste is to experience things reverently.... [T]hat leaves...ourselves more, not less, integrated."

Michael Miehl
Silver Spring, Md.

Now What?

Democrats ended 2021 on a down note with the apparent collapse of the Build Back Better Act. 2022 hasn't started any better, with two voting-rights bills defeated despite President Biden's impassioned plea for their passage. These failures would be distressing enough for Democrats if they could be blamed only on the fifty senators on the other side of the aisle, but they're particularly galling because two of their own—Arizona's Kyrsten Sinema and West Virginia's Joe Manchin—are among the obstructionists, refusing to lift the filibuster to get the bills through. With the math against them and the midterms bearing down, it may benefit President Biden and his party to focus on things they might actually be able to achieve—especially given that Americans generally like much of what the Democrats are proposing.

Begin by rethinking Build Back Better. If Manchin and the Republicans complained mostly about its price tag, there were legitimate reasons to criticize how the package was crafted. There were, for example, its accounting "gimmicks," as Manchin called them. The Build Back Better Act initially cost $3.5 trillion, and when Manchin said he would only support a bill half that size, Democrats lowered the cost by funding the same programs for fewer years rather than fully funding fewer measures, expecting that the programs would be funded in the future. Party leaders failed to take what they could get when Manchin still seemed willing to negotiate. They also never really sold the bill to the public, a task that was especially vital given its size and scope. A clearer argument about how the provisions of the Build Back Better Act would have helped people concretely—including Manchin's constituents in West Virginia—would have put more pressure on dissenters within the ranks.

Now that Build Back Better isn't likely to be passed in its entirety, Democrats should break it down into its most popular components and vote on them separately. This will require some difficult decisions about what to prioritize. Democrats should start with the measures that the American people have been shown to like most: paid family leave, investment in renewable energy, the child-tax credit, and allowing Medicare to negotiate lower drug prices. Individually, some of these measures could secure enough Republican support to pass the sixty-vote threshold. Another potential upside for Democrats is that by holding a vote on each bill, issue by issue, they will force Republicans to make a choice: either vote yea or be on the record against measures intended to help children and families, miners suffering from black-lung disease, or municipalities seeking to construct affordable housing.

Democrats' other legislative priority, the protection of voting rights, also seems out of reach. But they could still lead the effort to address the security of elections, which many observers believe is even more urgent than blocking new voting restrictions passed by Republican-controlled state legislatures. This would require fixing the Electoral Count Act of 1887, an obscure law that some Republicans cited as a legal justification for their attempt to overturn the 2020 election in favor of Donald Trump. As it stands, the ECA's confusing wording allows Congress to change a state's slate of presidential electors if just one member of each chamber challenges that state's electoral results. A reform of the ECA could prevent another attempt to overturn presidential-election results by clearly requiring that a larger number of lawmakers challenge a state's results before they can be set aside—and by clarifying that the vice president's role in the Congressional certification of votes is merely ceremonial.

The passage of a new ECA is not only important, it's also feasible. Republicans have demonstrated some interest in clarifying the rules. They remember that Democrats used the ECA to challenge state election results in the 2000 and 2004 elections, and to protest against Trump's having won in the Electoral College in 2016 despite losing the popular vote (although none of these were a Trump-style attempt meant to overturn legitimate results). Wyoming Rep. Liz Cheney, one of two Republicans on the House select committee investigating the events of January 6, has said that the panel would recommend changes to the ECA, and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell thinks that such changes are "worth discussing."

There is a lot of talk about how the Democrats need some kind of legislative victory—anything, really—to show voters that they deserve to stay in power this November. That's not wrong. But such partial victories are not merely symbolic or strategic. Democrats can rightly claim that they're still making real progress on issues that matter, even if they are at a stand-still on other important issues. Sweeping legislation that includes everything they want may be off the table for now. But Democrats still have the opportunity to pass legislation on some of the most urgent problems facing the country. They should take whatever they can get—not only because it's better than nothing but also because it demonstrates to the country that they are still capable of getting something done in the face of entrenched opposition. Nothing turns voters off like a reputation for helplessness. ✪ —*January 20, 2022*

The Bronx Fire

By all accounts Twin Parks North West in the Bronx was an unusually vibrant community, a small village within an affordable-housing high rise, home to a tightly knit Gambian community and tenants from elsewhere in West Africa and Latin America. That's in part what made the January fire that killed seventeen residents especially tragic. That, and the sense that it didn't need to happen.

The details are by now well-known: a space-heater left running over several days malfunctioned and set a third-floor unit on fire. As the tenants fled, a door that was supposed to close automatically remained open. Smoke poured from the apartment and into a stairwell, where it was sucked upward in a chimney-like effect because of another open door twelve floors higher. New York Mayor Eric Adams, just days into his new job, made the unfortunate misstep of appearing to blame the victims when he said the key lesson to take from the fire was: "Close the door." In fact, what the disaster made clear are the flaws in the larger affordable- and low-income housing system, a problem that extends beyond the borders of New York. More and more, large real-estate companies around the country have found there's money to be made in buying affordable-housing properties, given the demand for low-cost apartments that tenants can use rental vouchers to pay for. And many of these companies tend to prioritize profit over the kinds of maintenance and repairs needed to keep buildings safely habitable.

Yet it's in the Bronx where the downsides of this system often come most clearly into relief. The high price of New York real estate gives investor landlords even greater incentive to maximize net operating income at the expense of tenants in affordable-housing units. According to a 2020 Community Service Society report, ballooning property values have spurred owners to refinance their properties in the belief that values, along with rents, will only continue to climb. And in regularly assuming larger debt, they're even less inclined (or unable) to stay on top of fixes. Thus doors that are supposed to swing closed to stop the spread of fire and smoke remain open, in spite of repeated requests for repairs. Thus insufficient heating leaves a building so cold in early January that a family is forced to run a space heater continuously over several days.

Ritchie Torres, the Democratic congressman in whose district Twin Parks North West is located, has introduced legislation mandating self-closing doors in all federally funded housing and automatic shutoff on space heaters. Meanwhile, the outpouring of support for the residents of Twin Parks North West has been so generous that some relief organizations can no longer accept more supplies and are taking only financial contributions. In the aftermath of the tragedy, these come as welcome developments. But they don't address the underlying causes that still leave thousands of other people in similarly precarious situations. The continuing pandemic only worsens the problem. As Eileen Markey writes in the *New Republic*, landlords are "faced with declining buildings they can't afford to maintain and investors they are obliged to serve," while tenants face the end of an eviction moratorium and an uncertain future, at the mercy of a system that sees housing as an investment opportunity rather than a basic human right.

—Isabella Simon

Schools & Surges

Even after the latest Covid surge subsides, public schools will still face challenges laid bare by a pandemic about to enter its third year. A short list: outdated and overcrowded buildings lacking adequate ventilation; persistent racial and economic disparities that necessitate school-provided services and limit access to remote-learning technology; and a chronic shortage of substitute teachers and other staff, including bus drivers, aides, and nurses.

This is on top of the challenge of getting kids back on track. Evidence of the pandemic's toll on their mental health and socialization skills continues to pile up. The American Academy of Pediatrics has long warned about the impact of isolation on school-aged children, while educators and economists have expressed concern about the consequences of lost learning on educational attainment and social mobility. Recent data shows that since the pandemic began there's been a sharp drop-off in applications to public two-year colleges, which are a gateway to steady earnings and economic stability for millions of young people.

A continuing source of exasperation is conflicting and incoherent health-and-safety guidance coming from the federal government, most recently exemplified by the Biden administration's January promise to begin shipping 10 million Covid tests per month to the nation's schools—which educate more than 50 million students—weeks after they would have been most useful. Pandemic politics aren't helping matters. It's evident in the mishmash of protocols that vary not only from state to state but also from district to district. It's also evident in renewed hostili-

ty toward unions from the traditional critics of labor on the Right, who play on parental frustration to vilify teachers for keeping schools shuttered. The reality, of course, is not so simple. Classrooms are open across the country, but teachers are coming down with Covid themselves, leading to staff shortages in urban and rural districts alike. When Chicago teachers went on strike in January, they weren't attempting to hold the city and parents hostage, as some would have it, but simply looking for a reasonable pause and clearer guidelines on health and safety; they were soon back to work. In New York, Mayor Eric Adams abandoned his opposition to remote learning not because of union demands, but because legions of parents have been keeping their kids at home, while students at some of the city's largest high schools have staged walkouts in favor of suspending in-person classes when infection rates are high. Indeed, research shows that local demographics are a bigger factor than teachers' unions in whether schools shut down or not.

"Last to close, first to open" is the emerging mantra when it comes to keeping school in session, and it seems at least that most parties are coming around to that position. With time it's become clear that long-term closure of schools is not an option. But then we need to address the problems magnified by the pandemic. There has to be better leadership and consistency in guidance from elected officials, who must also ensure access to testing and masking while pushing for updates to aging facilities and ventilation systems. Schools should involve parents in crafting contingency plans for keeping classrooms open, and administrators should focus on hiring and ensuring sufficient backup staff and support. All the while, priority must be given to the needs of students—not just access to technology, but also programs for additional instruction, mental health, and social re-engagement. Americans have long professed to value public education, but it took a pandemic to remind us of just how much we need it.

—Dominic Preziosi

Lost in Translation

Pope Francis's January "state of the world" address to foreign diplomats was a powerful, if *mostly* unsurprising speech, enumerating his global political priorities for the coming year. Mostly unsurprising, except for the part that raised eyebrows and made headlines, when he took aim at "cancel culture" (emerging from Italian to say it in English). First he blamed it for hindering the work of international aid organizations and diplomacy. Then he broadened the critique, lamenting its prevalence in the wider culture: "Agendas are increasingly dictated by a mindset that rejects the natural foundations of humanity and the cultural roots that constitute the identity of many peoples.... I consider this a form of ideological colonization, one that leaves no room for freedom of expression and is now taking the form of the 'cancel culture' invading many circles and public institutions." The irony of this "one-track thinking," the pope went on to say, is that "under the guise of defending diversity, it ends up canceling all sense of identity."

The extent of creeping illiberalism on college campuses and in the media can be debated, and it's not entirely clear just which "circles and institutions" Pope Francis had in mind. But what most people seem to agree on is that Francis wasn't talking about the deplatforming of politicians and celebrities on social media. Rather, he was directing his ire at the way rich nations tend to impose their values on poorer ones.

The alternative to such "ideological colonization," Francis insisted, is on the one hand "reality therapy"—clear acknowledgement of the facts as they stand—and on the other, true dialogue concerning remedies to be taken. Pope Francis's original Italian is suggestive: all countries, and especially poorer ones, need to be granted a "*voce in capitolo*," literally a "voice in the chapter." The English translation ("to have a say") misses the key metaphor of the pope's views on genuine diplomacy. In the Benedictine tradition, members of the community all have the opportunity to express their views in the chapter room; instead of "politics as usual," a clash in which might makes right, there is long deliberation followed by discernment. In any decision taken, the good of each individual member goes hand in hand with the good of the whole community.

Francis's hope, articulated at the end of his speech, is that deliberation and dialogue among nations, once practiced, can become "contagious" and spread throughout the world. At this point, though, it seems like wishful thinking. Even in the sphere where Francis can exert control—that is, the inner workings of the Church—he has failed to convince many of his brother bishops, especially in the United States, to take up his project of synodality. It is tempting to suggest the pope and his advisors could benefit from a dose of reality themselves. On the other hand, we shouldn't let the loose interpretation of "cancel culture" obscure Francis's bigger point: our interconnected crises of global poverty, war, migration, and climate devastation aren't just problems rich countries should work to alleviate, but outcomes for which they bear direct responsibility.

—Griffin Oleynick

ZEEAD YAGHI

The Toll of Sectarian Politics

Letter from Lebanon

During the past two years Lebanon has gone through a series of crises that have pushed its residents to the brink of ruin. A financial collapse engineered by the governing elite saw millions lose their savings; an explosion in Beirut's port killed hundreds, maimed thousands, and destroyed the livelihoods of half the city; and now a global pandemic has pushed an already impoverished nation into outright destitution. The United Nations estimates that three-quarters of the population now live below the poverty line. Hundreds of thousands of Lebanese, both young and old, have left the country in search of greener pastures abroad. Lebanon's Christian community, which still makes up roughly a third of the population, is shrinking every day, many of its members having finally given up on making a good life for themselves in their home country.

Last summer the economic situation took a nosedive when the Lebanese lira became nearly worthless and the alternative currency, U.S. dollars, became scarce. When the state canceled all subsidies for fuel and gas, many could no longer afford to drive their cars. The electrical grid sporadically failed because the state could no longer afford to power its power plants. The network of private generators on which most of the country relied became prohibitively expensive; many could no longer afford to keep their refrigerators plugged in.

Medicine disappeared from the shelves of pharmacies after subsidies were removed there as well. People have started resorting to social media to procure medicine—from basic painkillers to chemotherapy drugs. Twitter is filled with desperate requests from people with serious medical conditions, while advertisements on Facebook and WhatsApp promise to fill prescriptions with weekly deliveries from Istanbul. Visitors to Beirut now often bring an extra suitcase filled with medicine and baby formula.

Schools have also taken a hit. The American University of Beirut, one of the most important institutions of higher learning in the Middle East for over a century, is struggling as faculty and staff quit for better futures abroad. Like every other institution in Beirut, it started losing money when banks implemented unofficial capital controls at the beginning of the crisis. In an effort to slow the flight of its faculty, the university has offered to pay professors 20 percent of their salaries in U.S. dollars and to pay the remainder in Lebanese lira at an exchange rate five times better than the market rate. Meanwhile, the Lebanese University—the country's flagship institution of higher learning with over eighty thousand students—remains in limbo. Its administrators and teachers squabble over pay raises, transportation subsidies, and a pandemic that has shifted most schooling online. But if there isn't any electricity to charge laptops, students won't be able to attend classes. And once the pandemic relents, how will teachers drive to campuses if gas is still too expensive?

The flight of capital from Beirut, along with the collapse of its administrative, medical, and educational sectors, is slowly provincializing what was once one of the most vibrant and cosmopolitan cities in the eastern Mediterranean. The crisis has demonstrated beyond all doubt how intimately linked the country's various institutions are: the collapse of one sends shockwaves across the whole Lebanese economy.

While Lebanon's political leaders remain mostly feckless and inert in the face of catastrophe, some of its other leading institutions, such as the Maronite Catholic Church, are sounding the alarm. The Church's leadership decries the flight of Christians from the country. Yet their actions over the past few years have done little to prevent that trend. By continuing to support political Maronitism, the Maronite Church plays a prominent role in protecting the regime of sectarian "consociational" governance that has led Lebanon into its current predicament. This problem goes back a long way. The Church solicited foreign and colonial support for Maronite-only rights and primacy in Lebanon during both the Ottoman and French-colonial eras. Some historians claim that the Maronite Church's intimate relationship with France is to blame for Lebanon's sectarian political system, in which different positions are reserved for members of specific religious communities.

This is not to suggest that the Church has always held the same line when it comes to Lebanese politics. It has sometimes opposed Maronite Lebanese presidents who threatened its agenda. When President Chamoun sought to extend his mandate in 1958, the Church did not support him. Still, the Church has been consistent about one thing: it has repeatedly shown that it cares less about good governance than about preserving the place of Maronites within Lebanon's constitutional framework. Apart from that principle, its political interventions are largely opportunistic.

The Maronite Church is one of the largest landowners in Lebanon. It often rents or leases its property to Lebanese businessmen enmeshed within the political establishment, making it an active player in the country's rentier capitalism. If the Church's leaders truly cared about the flight of Christians no longer able to afford life in Lebanon, they would use the Church's ample resources to support some kind social housing on Church land.

Or the Church could use them to help the students and teachers of the private Catholic schools it sponsors.

A woman in Beirut, January 26, 2021

CNS PHOTO/MOHAMED AZAKIR, REUTERS

As the Lebanese lira has plummeted to historical lows, Catholic schools have hiked up tuition to cover costs, forcing many students to drop out. The schools have also refused to increase the wages of their teachers and workers, whose salaries no longer keep up with the surging inflation. But so far the cries of both parents and teachers have fallen on deaf ears. In short, the Maronite Church refuses to put its money where its mouth is. Despite its frequent expressions of anxiety over the country's future, it has refused to spend its wealth to help those it claims to represent.

The Church's current leadership has also made some dubious political choices. The current patriarch, Bechara Boutros el-Rahi, is a close ally of the country's president, Michael Aoun, who has been in charge of the country during the period of its economic collapse. Aoun is also a staunch ally of Hezbollah, an organization responsible for the misery and torture of thousands of Arabs across the Levant, yet el-Rahi continues to stand by the president no matter how bad things get.

Every so often el-Rahi releases statements calling for Lebanon to be neutral in current geopolitical squabbles, yet in 2013 he restored the Maronite Church's ties with the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, another ally of Hezbollah. Assad has destroyed his own country, waging a civil war that has killed over half a million Syrians, and displaced half the population. This did not stop the patriarch from visiting Damascus and leading a service there with officials of the Assad regime in attendance. El-Rahi believes that religious minorities in the Levant, such as Christians, Alawites like Assad, and Shiite Muslims, must band together to resist the tide of Sunni political Islam. This sectarian reading of regional politics serves to perpetuate the misery of those who rose up against authoritarianism in the Middle East in the Arab Spring.

In October the patriarch proposed that Judge Tarek Bitar, the embattled state prosecutor leading the investigation of the Beirut Port explosion, be sidelined from his inquiry. Bitar has issued warrants for the arrest of several former Lebanese officials because of their role in creating the dangerous conditions that led to the explosion. Despite pressure from the political establishment and threats from groups like Hezbollah, Bitar has remained steadfast in his pursuit of justice. It's still too soon to predict whether he'll succeed, but after all the catastrophes the Lebanese population has faced in recent years, Bitar has become a symbol of integrity and justice. The current Lebanese government did not hold a session for almost three months because Hezbollah and its allies boycotted cabinet meetings unless Bitar was removed from the investigation.

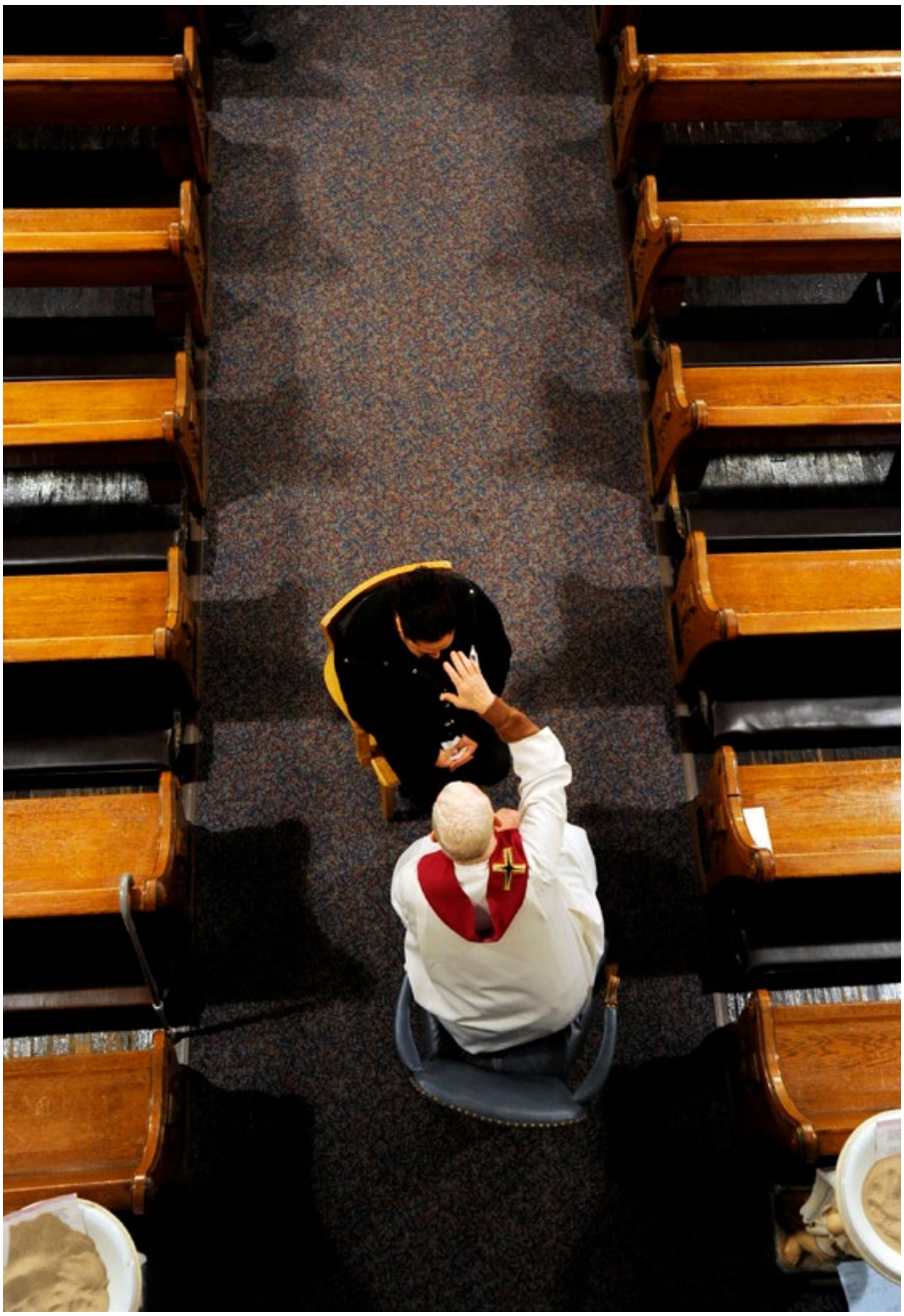
The Maronite Church has become an important force in Lebanese politics precisely because it embraces the sectarianism at the heart of Lebanon's social and political structures. Many anti-sectarian activists would scoff at the idea that the Maronite Church could ever welcome the kind of reforms the country so badly needs. But what is the alternative? The country's future is bleak; Lebanese Christians are leaving in droves. If the patriarch were as alarmed at the situation as he pretends to be, he would call for radical changes to the political system that has produced all these crises. He would be less concerned with preserving the Maronite Church's political power than with helping the ordinary Lebanese citizens—Christian and Muslim—whose lives have been blighted by a corrupt and incompetent political class. Until now, that class has been able to use sectarian loyalty to shield itself from accountability. Will el-Rahi allow that to continue?

ZEEAD YAGHI *is a PhD candidate in modern Middle East history at the University of California, San Diego.*

JOHN RODDEN

How the Irish Changed Penance

The history of a sacrament



Fr. Laurence Tracy hears a confession at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church in Rochester, New York, April 9, 2009.

CNS PHOTO/MIKE CRUPI, CATHOLIC COURIER

Most Catholics are probably unaware that what we today call the sacrament of Reconciliation existed in a completely different form during the early Christian era. Even those who are aware of this fact may not know that it was a group of Irish monks who were largely responsible for transforming this sacrament into the version with which we're familiar. It is all too easy to imagine that the seven sacraments have existed in something like their present form from the moment they were instituted. In truth, all of them have changed in important ways over the course of the Church's history, and none has changed more than the sacrament of penance.

For the Church's first seven centuries, penance could be received no more than once in a lifetime. That policy dated back to the time of St. Peter.

The New Testament tells us that Jesus gave the power of forgiveness to his disciples, but it says almost nothing about how they were to exercise it. In the early Church, the prevailing belief was that baptism was the celebration of the forgiveness of sin, and that the baptized, having turned away from sin, would not need to be forgiven again. As St. Paul wrote, "How can we who died to sin yet live in it? You must think of yourselves as being dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6).

Nevertheless, the Church Fathers soon realized that they needed a way to deal with post-baptismal sin because many baptized Christians were slipping back into their old way of life. A formal system of public penance was devised to handle such setbacks. Typically, after penitents confessed to the local bishop, they were assigned an onerous penance that lasted several years. During this time they wore sackcloth and garments that scratched or tore the skin, as a modest reminder of Christ's scourging. They were also required to leave Mass immediately after the homily and forbidden to receive the Eucharist. At least part of their penance consisted of long hours of prayer and fasting. Not until they had completed this long and arduous penitential period were they "reconciled" with the Church and welcomed back into full communion.

But reconciled penitents were expected to continue some penitential practices, such as abstinence from sexual intercourse, for the rest of their lives. Those who had been thus reconciled could not be admitted to the clergy or to most public offices. They remained permanently in a somewhat inferior position within the Church, partly for social reasons and partly as an explicit reminder of their lapse. Moreover, such a reconciliation was permitted no more than once in a lifetime, and it was required only for what were regarded as mortal sins, such as murder, adultery, and apostasy. Those guilty of what we now call venial sins were not expected to undergo any formal process; instead, they found forgiveness for their sins by participating in the Eucharist, almsgiving, and seeking forgiveness from those whom they had offended.

Christians who lapsed *again* into grave sin after they had been formally reconciled found themselves without recourse. "Now," your local bishop or priest informed you, "you are left to the mercy of God." The early Church feared that allowing sinners to be sacramentally reconciled more than once would encourage sin. But the rigors of penance and the practice of allowing Christians to receive the sacrament of penance only once had an unforeseen and highly problematic effect. Many people postponed their baptism for decades, because baptism offered forgiveness for a whole lifetime's worth of sins without the rigors of penance. Plus, those who waited until old age to be baptized were unlikely to lapse thereafter into serious sin more than once. Emperor Constantine, who had declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in 313, remained a catechumen until his own deathbed baptism in 337.

By the seventh century, it had become obvious to many that the Church's rules for penance were not working as they were intended to, but there were still no plans in Rome to reform them. It was precisely at this time that Irish monks began to travel to the European continent to proselytize the heathen Franco-German tribes. At least a century earlier, these monks had developed a different practice of penance within their own communities, adapting a little-known tradition traceable to the first monastic communities in the Egyptian desert. St. John Cassian, who had lived with these desert monks, took their practices with him when he founded a monastery in France. His writings were later taken to Ireland and it is there that they found fertile soil. Traditional public penances of the kind practiced in the early Church were not an option for the desert monks: there were no Christian communities, let alone dioceses, in the Egyptian desert. Like the monks in Ireland after them, they were struggling to overcome venial "faults" in their quest for saintliness, not seeking reconciliation after committing grave offenses such as murder, adultery, and apostasy. The Irish monks refined the work of Cassian, developing a system of confession in which the private recitation of sins was followed by the private performance of penance. Crucially, they not only adopted this practice themselves, but introduced it to the faithful outside the monastery, making it applicable to all sins and available to all sinners.

Then, without formal ecclesiastical approval, the missionary monks shared these more relaxed and flexible practices with the new converts in Europe. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* summarizes it: "During the seventh century Irish missionaries, inspired by the Eastern monastic tradition, took to continental Europe the 'private' practice of penance, which does not require public and prolonged completion of penitential works before reconciliation with the Church. From that time on, the sacrament has been performed in secret between penitent and priest." This was a radical change in the history of the sacraments. Gradually, confession went from being public to private, and from a once-in-a-lifetime rite to an as-often-as-needed practice. The "order of penitents," segregated from the rest of the community, disappeared.

The great virtue of the Irish monastic approach was how it aided the monk's quest for holiness. Regular confession became the supreme weapon of Celtic spirituality in the ceaseless spiritual combat against sin. Irish monks would regularly confess their faults to the presiding abbot of the monastery. As Joseph Stoutzenberger notes in *Celebrating the Sacraments,* gradually the practice came to include confessing faults to a highly trusted brother monk, who became known as the *anamchara* (*animae carus*), or "soul friend." The abbot or fraternal *anamchara* would pray with the penitent and prescribe actions to help him overcome his failing. Certain monks renowned for their spiritual advice

became popular confessors. Eventually, people outside the monasteries began coming to those monks to confess their sins. Because the whole Irish Church was organized around the monasteries, Irish bishops were sympathetic to the monks' approach to penance and did not regard it as lax or permissive. They recognized its practical and spiritual advantages and allowed it to continue.

But bishops elsewhere did not look so favorably on this alternative approach. Scholars such as Kate Dooley believe that the condemnation of private confession in Canon 12 at the Third Council of Toledo in 589 referred to the Irish monastic practice. That council reaffirmed the traditional rite, whereby reconciliation could be granted only once in a lifetime.

Undeterred, the Irish monks maintained their alternative practice and disseminated it in their missions abroad. Until the twelfth century, both the traditional rite of public penance and the Irish practice of private confession co-existed uneasily. Over time, however, fewer Christians sought the older form of penance, precisely because it was public, long, and severe. Where the older form was still favored, the faithful often treated penance exactly as previous generations had treated baptism: excommunicated members of the community chose to wait until they were on their deathbeds to be reconciled to the Church because the dying sinner could receive the sacrament without performing grueling public penances.

Although the Irish monks practiced frequent confession of their "faults"—and recommended that fellow Catholics do the same—they also continued for some time to impose severe penances on those who committed serious sins. As Hugh Connolly notes in *The Irish Penitentials*, the monk-missionaries brought handbooks known as "penitentials" with them on their travels. The handbooks suggested a suitable "tariff" or penance to "pay" according to the rank of the sinner, the rank of the person offended against, and the objective seriousness of the sin. Abuses were not unknown: wealthy penitents were sometimes able to negotiate a reduction in the tariff—or hire a substitute or "assistant" to carry out part or all of a severe penance. But over time the penitentials fostered consensus about the comparative seriousness of various sins and thus made assessments of the appropriate penance more uniform and less arbitrary.

Let's consider some tariffs from a typical ninth-century penitential. For the sin of theft, a layman was to perform one year of penance; a cleric, two; a subdeacon, three; a deacon, four; a priest, five; a bishop, six. For murder or perjury, the penance lasted three, five, six, seven, ten or twelve years, escalating according to rank. Heresy required a penance of twelve years. Perjury warranted a penance of between seven and eleven years if committed in violation of an oath to God. Usury brought three years; infanticide, fifteen; idolatry or demon-worship, ten. Violations of the sixth commandment were punished with particular severity, with penances ranging from three to fifteen years. The most extreme penalty was reserved for incest, for which the penance might last for as long as twenty-five years.

Whatever their duration, the penances included fasting on bread and water, either for the whole period or for specified parts of it. Those who could not fast were instead required to recite a certain number of psalms per day, to give alms, to "take the discipline" (scourging), or to perform some other penitential exercise as determined by the confessor. However, once reconciled, the penitent was restored to equal status with other members of the Church. The serious sins requiring a lengthy process of public reconciliation were gradually narrowed down to three—murder, apostasy, and adultery.

As the Irish monks made converts and founded new communities on the continent, they promoted a conception of penance aimed at restoring the sinner to a full relationship with God rather than at reconciliation with the community. They also shifted the focus from performing penances to making sincere and sorrowful confessions. In this new conception, the *anamchara* became a soul "doctor," empowered by God to help rescue the sinner from grave sickness of the soul, with confession serving as a kind of spiritual emetic. As one penitential handbook put it: "As the wounds of the body are shown to a physician, so too the sores of the soul must be exposed. As he who takes poison is saved by a vomit, so, too, the soul is healed by confession and declaration of his sins with sorrow."

As P. Biller and A. J. Minnis explain in *Handling Sin: Confession in the Middle Ages*, it was this milder form of penance promoted by the Irish missionaries that had gained wide acceptance throughout the Christian world by the early Middle Ages. In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council established that penance would involve private confession and that all Christians in the Latin Church would be obligated to confess their sins at least once a year. It was also at this time that penance officially became a sacrament. (The "dark box"—the confessional booth located in the rear of most churches—wasn't invented until the sixteenth century, during the Counter-Reformation.)

Those who associate Irish Catholicism with fire and brimstone may be surprised to learn that it was Irish monks who made penance more private and less exacting. In fact, as Lawrence Mick stresses in *Understanding the Sacraments: Penance,* it was the bishops and clergy on the continent who regarded the penitential practices of the Irish as a dangerous departure from tradition that would make reconciliation too easy. After centuries of debate, however, Rome finally sided with the Irish. Reconciliation, the Church decided, was not to be a one-time offer. A sacrament that claimed to offer God's mercy should not also try to ration it.

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SANTIAGO RAMOS

A Supplement, Not a Substitute

The thrill and peril of the Metaverse

Here is my pitch for a futuristic sci-fi thriller. In *the near future*—always, the most terrifying hour—the world has become a techno-hellhole. The terrain is empty, sterile, and hot. The few people above ground are laboring under brutal conditions to operate a fleet of mysterious machines. Meanwhile, the rest of humanity lives in a vast network of underground dwellings, sheltered from the oppressive climate. This privileged non-working class is hooked up to virtual-reality consoles and live out their lives within a fake universe of junk entertainment.

But fear not: we have a hero, and he has a plan. He believes in a better world, one that isn't founded on exploitation and hollow fantasies. But he knows that the machines are too strong to be defeated directly. It's too late to pull the plug; you must somehow make it so that there is no plug to begin with. So our hero time-travels to the year 375 BC. His plan is to seed human history with something—call it a meme, an idea, or a myth—that will provide immunity to the coming dystopia by conditioning human beings to always be on guard against its source. He invents a story and plants it in the middle of one of the most beautiful books ever written. In this tale human beings live in "an underground cave-like dwelling with its entrance, a long one, open to the light across the whole width of the cave. They are in it from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them, unable because of the bond to turn their heads all the way around." This, the hero explains, is the human condition. We are always inside a cave. What we often call "reality" is shadows cast upon the walls of that cave. *True* reality lies beyond the cave, under the pure light of the sun, in the warm home we call the Earth. The struggle to leave the cave—"the art of turning around"—is never-ending. Every generation must take it up.

Our hero succeeds. The storytellers of subsequent centuries continually reinterpret and rewrite the cave story. The latest iteration of the myth is Steven Spielberg's 2018 $4 million-dollar extravaganza *Ready Player One*. This movie acts like an antibody against dystopia, as does every story that sounds a warning about what happens when a

Mark Zuckerberg demonstrates an Oculus Rift virtual-reality headset, October 6, 2016.

DAVID PAUL MORRIS/BLOOMBERG VIA GETTY IMAGES

The Metaverse would make it easier than ever to focus only on self-creation and neglect self-discovery.

society values images over reality: *Brave New World*, *Snow Crash*, *The Truman Show*, *The Matrix*, *WALL-E*, and various episodes of *The Twilight Zone* and *Black Mirror*. The hero returns to a happier "near future" than the one he left. In the closing scene the camera zooms in on his satchel, and in it is a diary that finally reveals our hero's name: Socrates Zuckerberg, the grandson of the founder of Facebook.

Would you believe me if I told you this film scenario is really a dream I had the night after I first heard about the Metaverse? Mark Zuckerberg believes that this new virtual-reality environment is "the next chapter for the internet." He promises it will change the world. "Your devices won't be the focal point of your attention anymore. We're starting to see a lot of these technologies coming together in the next five or ten years. A lot of this is going to be mainstream and a lot of us will be creating and inhabiting worlds that are just as detailed and convincing as this one, on a daily basis." Zuckerberg's launch video for the Metaverse gives us a glimpse into a virtual reality where we will don avatars (e.g., a robot, a holograph, or a cartoon), float, fly, play cards, and sit in on business meetings. Based on trends observed in social media and other online communities, we can expect the development of virtual currencies, complicated status hierarchies, novel cultural conflict, and new forms of communication driven by images more than words. The Metaverse will be a malleable and submissive version of the real world.

As others have already pointed out, a basic "metaverse" already exists, in the form of the internet as we know it today, with all its pros and cons. And the coming Metaverse could make many good things possible: it might be a boon to architects, engineers, surgeons, pilots, astronauts, and anyone else who needs simulation-based training. We already see that virtual-reality equipment can improve rehabilitation from injury. The Metaverse could become something like a living textbook for the hard sciences. Whatever its downsides, it will likely offer tools to help us live better in the real world.

It's when the connection with that real world is sundered—or when the Metaverse becomes a competitor rather than supplement to it—that comparisons with Plato's allegory of the cave and various other dystopian stories are warranted. The race to substitute the territory with its map is a natural tendency for an economy that packages and sells images. Home of Hollywood and the "personal brand," the United States seems to have learned how to do this faster, and on a greater scale, than any other country. Yet a love for imaginary worlds is simply part of being human, and it's not always a bad thing. Images can be beautiful and good for us, as prehistoric cave drawings and medieval cathedrals both attest. And when they *aren't* good for us, we have a pretty good track record of checking ourselves. The enduring relevance of Plato's *Republic* suggests that, however new the Metaverse itself might be, the concerns it raises are not new. Those concerns can be summed up in a few basic questions: What is imagination, and what is truth? Why seek an elusive truth beyond appearances if the appearances themselves are more pleasant? These questions seem academic until you realize just how easy it is to spend your life dwelling in appearances. You can live within your self-conceit. You can live protected by wealth. You can live apart from others. You can *believe your own résumé*. TVs, smartphones, and social media can make the temptation to dwell in appearances worse, and so could the Metaverse.

In a culture dominated by the Metaverse, the idea of self-knowledge as we currently understand it could disappear. Even before the Romantics, self-knowledge has always implied a degree of self-creation: we (partially) invent who we are. But self-knowledge also involves self-*discovery*, an encounter with truths about ourselves that we cannot avoid and must embrace. In the mystical tradition, the path of self-discovery finally takes us beyond ourselves and culminates in a meeting with Another—God. The Metaverse would make it easier than ever to focus only on self-creation and neglect self-discovery.

Yet escaping into the Metaverse might also awaken a longing for things that cannot be found within it—things only the real world can provide: love and sexual intimacy, raising a family, visiting a foreign city, a hamburger, the warmth of the sun. The Metaverse will never be inexhaustible the way reality is; it will always be derivative of reality, based on a programmer's particular perspective, and therefore—despite claims to the contrary—never as rich as the genuine article. To wonder about the mysterious workings of nature is not the same as marveling at an intricate piece of man-made engineering. Some might argue that engineering is often preferable to nature. Not everyone is in a good position to appreciate all that nature has to offer: many suffer limited mobility or freedom due to illness or injustice. For such people, the Metaverse might be a welcome respite from the real world. But even those who suffer from such debilities and disadvantages would probably prefer, if they had the choice, to improve their reality rather than to escape from it. We may settle for fantasy, but it isn't what we aspire to.

In the 1980s, Jaron Lanier was a pioneer in the development of virtual reality. Since the late 1990s, he has written essays and books about the cultural impact of technology. In a recent interview he told Lex Fridman that "I have always found the very most valuable moment in virtual reality to be the moment when you take off the headset. Your senses are refreshed and you perceive physicality afresh as if you were a newborn baby."

Even when virtual reality is renamed "augmented reality" and aims to supplement reality rather than to replace it—as we saw during the 2016 Pokémon Go craze—the virtual bits of the game remind us that real stuff is better. "One of my favorite things is to augment a forest, not because I think a forest needs augmentation," Lanier says. "But when you look at the augmentation next to a real tree, the real tree pops out as being astounding.... It's hard to pay attention to that, but when you compare it to virtual reality, all of a sudden you do." In his 2017 memoir, *Dawn of the New Everything: Encounters with Reality and Virtual Reality*, Lanier concludes that virtual reality "should be enjoyed as one of life's treats, but not as an alternative to life."

If Lanier is right—if reality is truly so attractive, so pregnant with wonder—we won't be able to resist it for long. I doubt that a simulation could bring me as much joy as the real-life trip to Yosemite I took with my friends last summer. Several apps helped us along the way, but the majestic valleys and peaks were our motivating interest. All of us are connected to Earth by a tether of desire, and suppressing desire is never a viable long-term proposition. The Metaverse will pose challenges that will be met, in turn, by political, pedagogical, religious, and cultural responses. But whatever the future holds, we already have the antibodies.

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POETRY

BEACH HAVEN, NEW JERSEY

Magda Andrews-Hoke

I'm afraid
of who it is
that made
these things.

The surf
repeatedly blasting
the sand
to waste,

the weird slide
of seagulls
along
the breeze,

the smashed shells,
stranded weeds,
the bells
of shape-shifting

clouds. The all-
maddening sound
of churning.
A will

wrathed with
delirious light
alone
could carve

a foamy,
flickering line
and then expect
small beings

to dance
on it
lovingly
till death.

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Opening to the World

Luke Timothy Johnson

My journey from young monk to mature scholar

Late in the summer of 1963, I entered the novitiate at St. Joseph's Abbey in Covington, Louisiana, thinking I'd arrived into a tranquil and unchanging world. The community was of medium size for Benedictine monasteries, with a total of about sixty monks garbed in the distinctive Benedictine habit: a simple black tunic with a leather belt around the waist, over which was a scapular with cowl, or hood. The main work was administering and teaching at St. Ben's, the adjacent minor seminary from which I had recently graduated, but the common life demanded that all the monks play a variety of roles—cantor, organist, mechanic, barber. The community consisted of choir monks and lay brothers: the former solemnly professed and either ordained as priests or in training for ordination; the latter having made simple vows and performing the bulk of the practical work required in a large community. The monks lived a radically communal life, in which all possessions were shared; the practice of a community of goods expressed the virtues of obedience and humility. All of this was standard and had been for centuries.

Appearances, however, deceived. As I began this new life, forces of turmoil and dramatic change were at work below the surface. The reforming ferment of the Second Vatican Council was already stirring. It was also a time of cultural upheaval around issues of sexuality. Much emphasis was placed on personal fulfillment, and the celibate life was an easy target. Monastic life could seem, even to its adherents, out of touch in a religion that was rapidly privileging the active over the contemplative life. The effect of these upheavals was the disaffection and then the departure of many monks. The depletion of the Catholic religious orders had begun. Perhaps as an indication of the lean years to come, I was the only novice to enter St. Joseph's in 1963.

Life of St. Benedict fresco by Sodoma, Cloister of Abbazia di Monte Oliveto Maggiore Abbey, Tuscany, Italy

On making simple vows in 1964, I took the name Luke, partly because it was biblical and partly because it was short and difficult to twist by the clever young boys I thought I would someday teach. Thus, my authorial name, Luke Timothy Johnson. Holding on to my monk name is deliberate. The mark of monasticism on me is permanent, and the name reminds me that, in addition to my baptism into the faith, I also carry with me the effects of another initiation into a special form of discipleship. By my vows, I also signed on to the system of preparation for the ordained priesthood as prescribed by canon law. This meant that my next years would be spent in the formal study of philosophy and theology.

The young monks studied philosophy at Notre Dame Seminary, located on Carrollton Avenue in New Orleans, and in 1964 the classic curriculum of philosophy classes remained unchanged. Lectures and exams were in Latin. Students moved progressively through the categories of philosophy that date back to Diogenes Laertius in the third century. The framework was the form of scholastic philosophy that had been dominant within Catholicism since the time of Leo XIII, namely, neo-Thomism. Thomas Aquinas was the unsurpassed authority and the abiding spirit. Students began with logic (Aristotelian logic, to be sure), then they moved to epistemology, cosmology, metaphysics, and ethics. Although the schema was rigid, I was deeply grateful for learning it, first because Thomas's philosophy is a remarkably sound and sane perspective on reality, and second because this framework allowed me space to explore all other philosophical voices without confusion.

The work of a monk-student was to study, so I was free, apart from the regular round of prayer, meals, and recreation, to indulge as never before my passion for wide reading. Actual work on classes took little time. Instead, I went on a spree of freelance reading in philosophy, indiscriminately and with no thought to sequence. I was drawn to thinkers who might be called existentialist in orientation and whose approach was concrete and phenomenological. Human experience as the object of thought and the shaper of thought summoned my attention, and would continue to do so for the rest of my life as a scholar. The two thinkers who influenced me the most were Søren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel. I cannot remember how I found either, but once discovered, they galvanized my mind. Kierkegaard thrilled me first not only because of the sheer brilliance of his writing and the daring character of the dialectic he was working out through his use of pseudonymous authorship, but also because he thought directly on the face of existence. In Marcel, I found a French Catholic existentialist philosopher who would be an intellectual companion for life.

My voracious reading went completely unnoticed by either fellow monks or seminary professors. Nobody seemed to have any clue that I was engaged in such a passionate pursuit. But what was I pursuing? "Truth" is much too large an answer, for I was not interested in a "truth" that was other than the one within which I lived. I think I was truly hungry to read words written by great minds. By no means did I wish to become a Kierkegaardian or a disciple of Marcel. Why I valued them, I think, was that in them I began to learn how to think in a way I had not before. Philosophy, I understood, was not about dogma, it was about a process of reflection on reality. It was about thinking, concretely, clearly, and without deception, on human existence in all its manifestations.

At the end of these two years immersed in philosophy, I came to two conclusions. The first is that I really had learned what thinking was about, and that I had started to think for myself in response to all these thinkers. This gave me a great boost of self-confidence. The second is that whatever thinking I would do in my subsequent life, it would be based not on abstractions but on contact with and reflection on actual human experience. I would not be a student of texts alone, but of texts as transparent to existence in the world.

Rather than continue at Notre Dame for my theological studies, I was sent to St. Meinrad School of Theology in southern Indiana. This was a singular blessing. It continued to provide a context of pervasive religious faith, monastic discipline, excellent music, good fellowship, and wide reading. I can see now that my time at St. Meinrad, an archabbey and seminary set on a high hill and at the time one of the best theologates in the country, put me firmly on the path to becoming a scholar.

During my four years at St. Meinrad, I was able to share fully in the monastic life as a visitor who had no other obligation except to study. But the monastery and school of theology struggled with a number of tensions. First, the decrees of Vatican II pressed all religious communities to decide individually how reforms were to be embodied. At St. Meinrad, a deep rift developed between the older monks (largely conservative) and the younger monks (largely liberal). The liberals advocated for change on the basis of history, arguing, for example, that patristic-era Eucharistic formulae clearly antedated and were superior to the Tridentine version, while the conservatives stood on the basis of tradition. Sadly, ideological differences mingled with personal animosity, forcing one to pick sides. Another tension involved the question of how to teach theology, now that the traditional scholastic handbooks had been abandoned. This proved difficult to answer. Students still learned doctrine and morals and canon law, but in a much more ad hoc and diverse manner.

I entered the school of theology at the point when its faculty had made two clear decisions. The first concerned rigor. The basic grade was to be a C; students had to demonstrate that they deserved an A or a B. During my time in the theologate, that standard was fairly well maintained. The second decision concerned the curricular framework: history, not scholasticism, was to hold the learning of theology together. Thus, Church history was required every semester of the four years. History, moreover, was to be based as much as possible on the study of primary more than secondary sources. The Second Vatican Council had been preceded by a century of reform-minded Catholic scholars "returning to the sources," and this spirit animated the program at St. Meinrad.

My first year at St. Meinrad was particularly memorable. The class in early Christianity was taught by the young Aidan Kavanagh, who would become a universally recognized authority in the study of liturgy, and Polycarp Sherwood, who had published a pioneering and authoritative work on Maximus the Confessor. Classes were demonstrations of superb scholarship, with specific attention to the sources. Aidan led us from Jewish synagogue services through the early Christian Church orders, which displayed the variety of early Eucharistic prayers that shortly would, on the council's decree, stand alongside and relativize the Tridentine Latin Mass. Polycarp dealt with the development of doctrine in complex and rambling lectures that students called "Sherwood's Forest," but occasionally he would exegete passages from patristic writers (in Latin and Greek) with great delicacy and precision.

A couple of events from my time at St. Meinrad stand out as significant in my becoming a scholar. The first was a Jewish-Christian dialogue between the Conservative rabbi Arthur Hertzberg and the German Catholic theologian Johannes Baptist Metz (a student of Rahner), who represented the new "political theology" that deliberately engaged Marxist theory and praxis. The entire student body and monastery attended the lengthy, multi-day sessions. It was my first real experience of public theology—and on such an important issue, in light of Vatican II's declaration on the Jews—and it left me with the sense that such public intellectual activity was eminently worthwhile.

The second was the chance to work for a master's in religious studies at Indiana University in Bloomington. The School of Theology and the Department of Religious Studies at IU made it possible for us to take a semester of classes on campus, then write a thesis, and so receive the MA virtually simultaneously with the MDiv from St. Meinrad. We lived in the graduate residence, mixed with all the other students, and participated fully in a normal graduate program. This was the first time I had mingled with, much less partied with, women of any age, since grade school. It was 1969—"Hey Jude" blared in the student lounge, a malcontent set fire to the university library, and the "Free University" held classes in the meadow—so the atmosphere was heady for one who thought of himself as otherworldly. Heady, and invigorating, but not yet destabilizing.

The most mind-opening class was William May's course on religion and culture. We began by examining some of the classic texts in religious phenomenology (Otto, van der Leeuw, Eliade), and then began to apply its categories to cultural phenomena, such as the burgeoning student movement. The books that most challenged me were Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *Social Construction of Reality* and Peter Berger's *Sacred Canopy*. I fought Berger page by page, but I ended up accepting his argument. I fully understood that, for the first time, I had stepped out of the monastic world by which I had defined myself. I grasped that the monastic culture, and indeed, Catholicism itself, was but one of many "plausibility structures" by which humans secure identity. And, remarkably, I was less afraid than exhilarated.

I spent the year of 1970–1971 back in my home monastery in Louisiana. Apart from one session of summer school in Indiana, I had, in fact, spent three months of each year in my own community. During these summer sojourns I participated fully in the routine of my monastic home. My work assignments were enjoyable precisely because they involved the kind of hard physical labor that encouraged contemplation: hauling garbage to the dump, mucking out the holding barn at the dairy, and cutting back the growth that threatened to overwhelm the grounds in

Luke Timothy Johnson

the brutal Louisiana heat. Apart from those assignments, though, I was free to spend many hours reading in the monastic music room.

But when I returned full time (as I thought) to my community, I was considerably changed from the young man I had been as a novice. I noticed that, unconsciously, I had allowed the alternating pattern of stays at St. Meinrad and St. Ben's to camouflage deeper personal issues. I realized that, however satisfying the studies at St. Meinrad, I would each year grow more and more critical of the tensions within that large community. "Things were better at home," I would tell myself, as I eagerly awaited the summer. And each summer, it would at first seem as though they were. Yet, by late August, I was always itching to get back to St. Meinrad.

Still, the constant conflict between the younger, reformist monks (with whom I gladly if unreflectively aligned myself) and the older, traditionalist monks at St. Meinrad was a cause of irritation. It was all too easy for us young theological blackshirts to caricature and despise those clinging (as we saw it) to old ways. After all, we had history on our side. We were right! We wanted revolution now. And we got it. Reforms were so drastic that all the old forms of piety were discarded. The Latin texts that had sustained monks for 1,500 years were literally thrashed. The Gregorian chant was replaced by ersatz compositions of little worth. Worst of all, we had no concern for the stories that might have been told by the older monks, about what those forms of piety had meant to them, about what the cost of radical change might be. We may have been right on the issues, but we were not righteous in our dispositions. (A decade later, I looked back at this frenzied period and felt a great weight of guilt at our—and specifically my—behavior, and I began a lifelong project of thinking how communities might discern righteously through the recognition of God's activity among all God's people.)

The atmosphere was better at my own community. We did not experience such hostile divisions. Charity continued to reign. But certain fundamental things had shifted within me, making me begin to wonder if I was truly fit for life as a monk. At the most overt level, I was deeply troubled, as many Catholic theologians were at that time, by the 1968 encyclical *Humanae vitae*. I considered Paul VI's argument supporting the prohibition of artificial birth control both formally and materially in error, and I was not sure how I could deal, as a priest, with penitents who confessed such practice as a sin. More covertly, I was increasingly aware of the tension within me between an awakening desire for intimacy and my punctilious observance of the rules. In light of Paul's letter to the Romans, I felt deeply convicted of a "works righteousness" in my rigid (one might even call it obsessive-compulsive) adherence to rules. Finally, my experiences at St. Meinrad and IU gave me a much greater confidence in my intellectual abilities, as well as an openness to "the world" from which I had turned when becoming a monk. By dint of a habit of intellectualization and a knack for compartmentalization, I had suppressed desires that I could not name even to myself. But I was a tinderbox, ready to be lit.

A big factor in lighting it was the Catholic charismatic movement. It emphasized the gift of the Spirit as an actual and present power in lives, which could be expressed by speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healings, and it was spreading rapidly among Catholics who were, in light of the council, eager for renewal by God and not just by ecclesiastical decrees. As it happened, a charismatic group began in Covington, gathering in the seminary for its prayer meetings.

An attractive, vivacious thirty-six-year-old local woman with six children was part of the leadership team. Her name was Joy Barnett, and she attended Mass daily at the abbey church. She and her husband enjoyed considerable wealth, and they lived at Oak Hill Farm outside Covington. My life became more complicated when Joy's spiritual director insisted that she take the class on comparative religion with me. This led to a friendship that would eventually explode my life and reshape it. In 1971, I was accepted into Yale for doctoral work—a monk and intellectual with some scholarly leanings and some scholarly ability. When I finished at Yale I had the focus and the desire to produce that mark the mature scholar. I was also a husband with a child and six stepchildren. My life had undergone changes I could never have anticipated.

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KALEEN ENKE

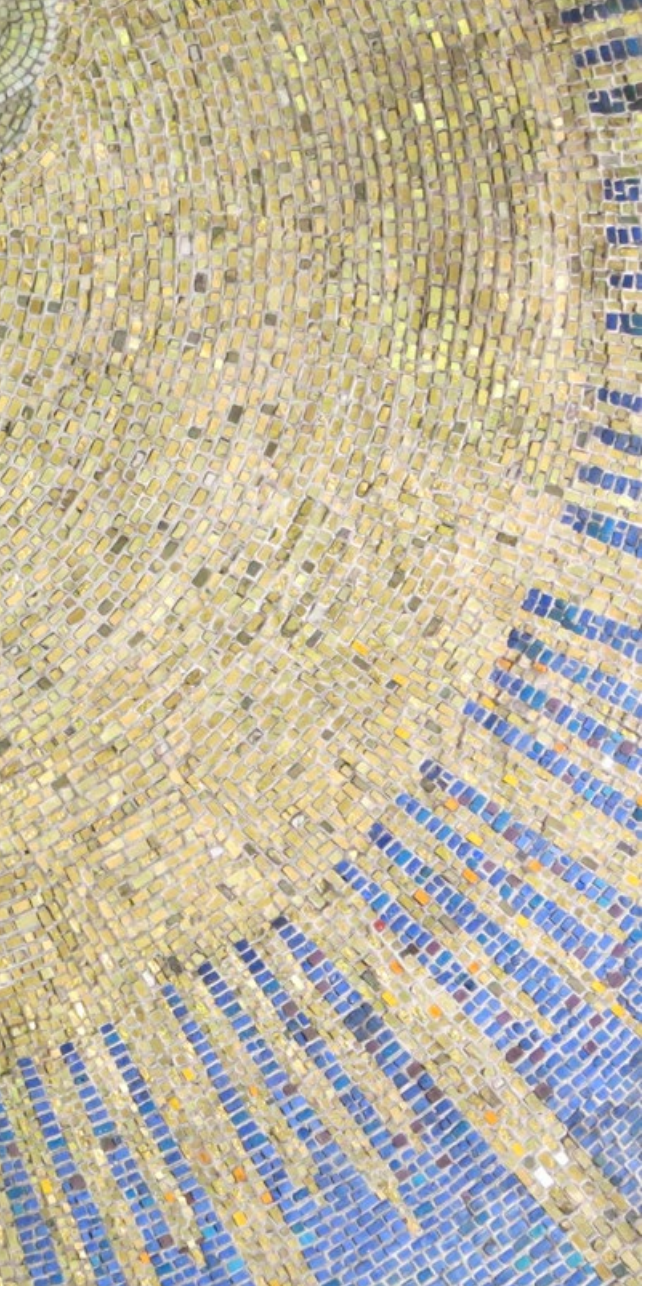
The hand of God in the dome of the Belfast Cathedral, created in 1924 by the Martin sisters

KAY RINGWOOD/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Images of the Invisible God

Jeff Reimer

How icons avoid idolatry



What happens when we look at an image of a person's face—a painting, a drawing, a photograph? What the mind registers at first glance is not the parts but the whole: the expression, the demeanor, the visage. Only after we have instantly taken in the whole, recognized the face as the face of a person—a subject who addresses us, and not just an object—do we take in the various parts, as our eyes move over curve of nose, bloom of lip, shade of cheek. But what first gives us entrance to the image of the other is the eyes. We have to stop ourselves and unlock our gaze in order to attend to the various parts that show us what else the face is telling us, what it is disclosing to us about the person whose image it is, the world that the image is a part of and participates in. The face is the map, but the eyes are the legend of the map. A disorientation is required that leads to a further, deeper reorientation—sundering, as the poet Richard Wilbur says, "things and things' selves for a second finding." *Seeing* the image, rather than merely looking at it, draws us deeper into it, illuminates things we failed to notice in the first, necessary instant of recognition. Seeing involves an attentiveness to the face that allows that first moment of recognition, and it deepens our encounter with the person represented in the image.

Gazing in devotion at an icon involves this double movement—a glance, a disorientation, a second finding. The face in an icon demands that the viewer enter into its world on *its* terms; and its terms are submission, suffering, holiness. One must find oneself addressed. One must first be mastered by the image before one can enter into it—before, as Jean-Luc Marion says, "the gaze of man is lost in the invisible gaze that visibly envisages him." When we look at the face of Christ in an icon, we are looking at the face of a man, but not *only* a man. The gaze of faith sees the face of God.

These reiterative attentions—and the demands they entail—feature prominently in Flannery O'Connor's short story "Parker's Back." In a tattoo parlor Obadiah Elihue Parker hurriedly flips through a book with options for tattoos of God. He dismisses several images as he rifles through them: "The Good Shepherd, Forbid Them Not, The Smiling Jesus, Jesus the Physician's Friend." But then: "On one page a pair of eyes glanced at him swiftly." In a long series of sentences in which Parker is the acting subject, this is the only one in which he is not. He is caught in a passive moment of address, the image exerting a kind of agency. When he turns back to the page he sees "a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes." Later, when he has gotten the tattoo, he looks at it in a mirror, and "the eyes in the reflected face continued to look at him—still, straight, all-demanding, enclosed in silence." The eyes disorient his life, turn it completely upside down. "The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes that were to be obeyed." What choice does he have but to obey? Under the gaze of those eyes, "he was as transparent as the wing of a fly." It is this gaze that is the catalyst of Parker's transfiguration.

Not long ago I got into a conversation with a couple of friends about images of God. These friends are Dutch Reformed. Though both of them have been deeply shaped by their Reformed faith, neither of them fits the stereotype of the zealous hyper-Calvinist eager to cast down the idols of superstition. Rather, in the course of our

To represent the unutterably holy is to risk not only that we will worship the representation but also that we will trivialize it.

conversation they wrestled honestly with the cultural and theological influences of their tradition on their visual sensibility. They were cautious about religious art—particularly art depicting Christ—even while they both admitted to frequently being drawn to its beauty. One of them said, "I love religious art, and yet I always feel a little bit like I shouldn't—like perhaps my love of aesthetics is overriding any genuinely theological consideration of imagery." Then she pointed out a particularly beautiful carved icon of Christ walking on the waters, his garments, nimbus, and the waters he touches illuminated with gold. In response, my other friend said, "I find myself drawn into the beauty of the image and the scene that it depicts, but not necessarily taken in by the image of Christ's face. There is a holding back there, for me." What struck me, as an outsider to the Reformed tradition, was not the restrictiveness but the thoughtfulness, the restraint, the impulse to hold back in looking on the face of God.

To gaze upon the face of God is a perilous and a terrifying undertaking. The ancients knew that under ordinary circumstances to see God was to be destroyed. Seeing God and living to tell about it was possible only under tightly governed conditions. The prohibition against graven images in the Decalogue seems to rest on this prior assumption. To presume that one could enter into the presence of the divine was to transgress the ordering of the natural and supernatural worlds—the sacred and the profane—and thus to bring violence upon oneself. The law is an intermediary, a means of access to God. At Mount Sinai the Israelites say to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die" (Exodus 20:19). And God tells Moses on the mountain, "You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live" (Exodus 33:20).

And after Jacob wrestles the angel at the river Jabbok, he is amazed because, as he says, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered" (Genesis 32:30).

And Isaiah, after seeing "the Lord sitting upon a throne," says, "Woe is me! For I am lost…for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:1,5).

Ezekiel has a vision of God, but struggles to describe what the vision discloses: "And above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance" (Ezekiel 1:26). These various stages of remove—a likeness upon likeness—are appropriate to divine vision not because the form of the Lord's glory is vague or unintelligible but because it exceeds description. God's unmediated presence obliterates human categories.

We have lost this understanding—and not, I believe, because it is false. As a result, we have also lost the capacity to think and act as if the prohibition against imaging the Godhead in Scripture and tradition carries moral and ethical weight. To represent the unutterably holy is to risk not only that we will worship the representation but also that we will trivialize it. It is therefore worth asking whether looking upon an image of God can result in a sort of damage. And if it can, a further question follows: Under what conditions might gazing upon an image of God *not* damage us?

For Christians, it is the Incarnation that makes possible the conditions in which we are not ultimately destroyed by the consuming fire of God's presence. The Orthodox party at the Second Council of Nicaea claimed that a refusal to allow the image of Christ to be depicted and venerated is tantamount to a refusal of the Incarnation itself—that in the Incarnation matter admits of divine penetration. Indeed, icons in the Orthodox Divine Liturgy admit of every human sense: they are gazed upon and thus seen; they are kissed and thus tasted; they are censed and thus smelled; they are even heard, when on the Sunday of the Triumph of Orthodoxy the priest holds the image in front of his face and the icon itself "proclaims" the Synodikon of Orthodoxy. These are ritual acts, performed with care and reverence. The iconic portrayal of Christ and the saints in images, along with the veneration shown to them, is tightly governed by Orthodox tradition because the Orthodox—like Calvinists, and like the Israelites of old—understand the difficulty of looking upon the holy.

Orthodoxy thus moderates the flow, so to speak, of image-making, maintaining an iconographic tradition that prizes not originality or creativity but a set of conventions that may be innovated on only by working in continuity with the tradition. As my Reformed friend might say, love of aesthetics does not override the theological consideration of imagery.

But by the ninth century the West and the East had already been drifting apart for centuries. The iconoclastic controversy was an Eastern phenomenon, and neither the sacramental theology of icons that provided the basis for their veneration nor the prohibitions against imaging the Father that upheld the Mosaic commandment ever took root in the Latin-speaking world. In the West images were

Giotto di Bondone, *The Baptism of Christ*, c. 1305

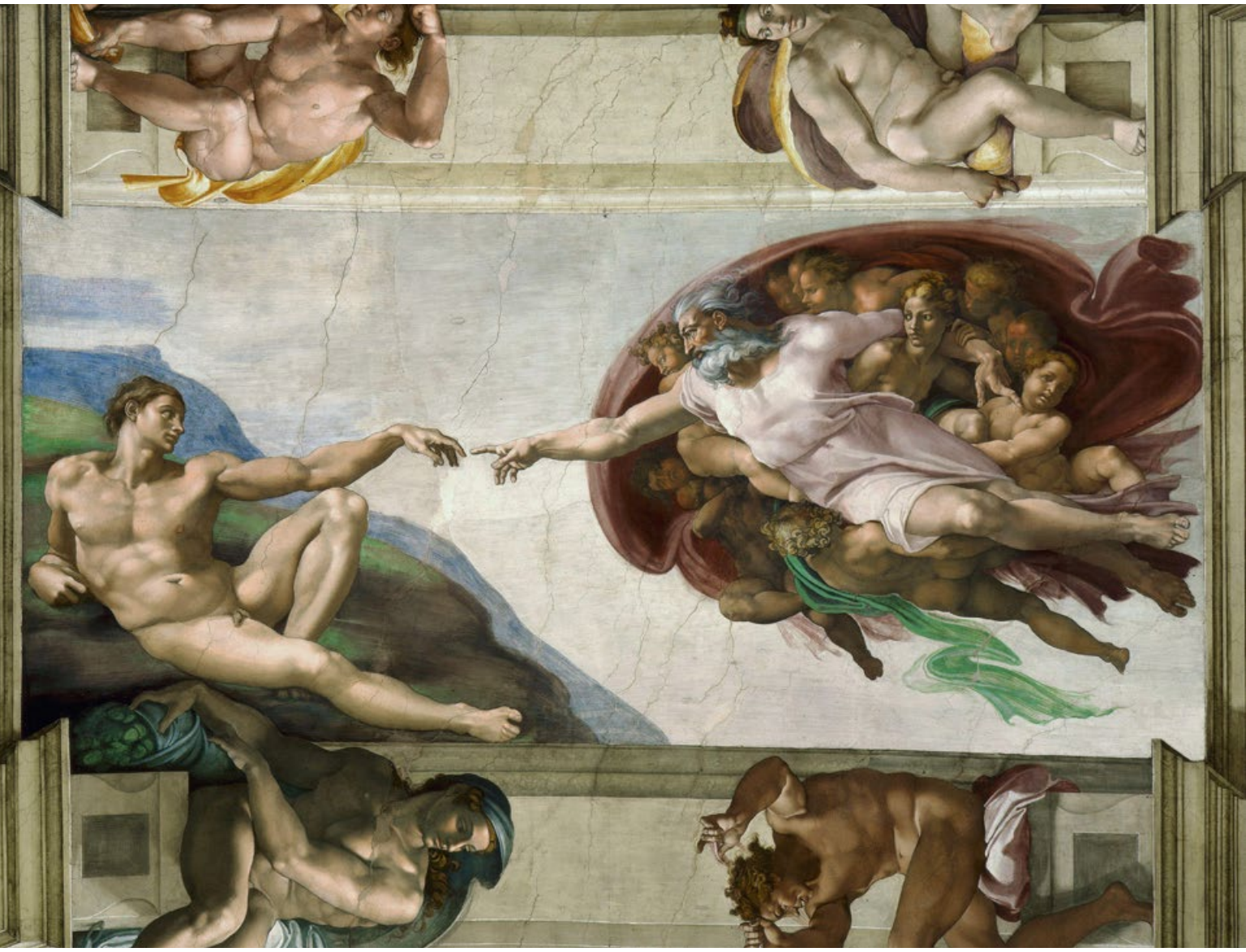
teaching devices; in the East they were incorporated into worship. In the West, they reflected tradition; in the East, they *were* tradition—a mode of revelation.

In Orthodox iconography, the unrepresentable, invisible presence of God the Father is only "depicted" with gold leaf, a material that cannot be mixed with paint but whose luminance suffuses the entire image. In the words of the Orthodox theologian Pavel Florensky, "The icon is executed upon light." Gold leaf thus represents not an object but the uncreated light of God's energies, whose interactions with the created order "constitute the ontological skeleton of a thing." The medium, in other words, is the metaphysics.

But in the West after the first millennium (and sometimes in the East too), the invisible Father began to appear. Previously he might have been portrayed symbolically—at Christ's baptism, say—as a finger or a hand or a golden orb. Slowly, however, he began to be depicted as a head and then a bust, usually in the form of Christ, because according to the Gospel of John, to see the Son is to see the Father. Even so, the Father was still not fully enclosed within the frame.

That changed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when for the first time the entire outline of God's perimeter could be traced. While these images were at first relatively indeterminate, they slowly became clearer. And when the Father was depicted, he occupied a separate, "sacred" space—an upper quadrant of the frame, maybe—or he was inscribed within a circle, representing "infinite" space.

It was Michelangelo who crossed, in the words of the art historian Elizabeth Lev, "the ultimate frontier of invisibility." In the panels of the Sistine Chapel, God the Father is fully present in human form—he has feet and legs and abdominal muscles—and he



Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*, 1508–1512

occupies the same visual space as humanity. After 1512, when the Sistine Chapel was finished and unveiled, God the Father was a fixture within the frame of Western art. This change was, in its own way, as significant as the advent of linear perspective a few decades earlier. Both innovations were rejected by the Eastern Orthodox Church.

All of this occurred without reference to either the affirmations or the anathemas of John of Damascus and the fathers of the Second Nicene Council. There was in fact almost no discursive reflection or rationale, and surprisingly little scandal or controversy, as the scope of the representable in Western art expanded. So it is a little difficult to understand *why* these changes occurred. Any explanation is thus of necessity speculative, provisional, and incomplete. Three lines of thought provide rough explanations for these slow but steady changes, all of them converging on the intellectual developments in the West associated with the Renaissance. One line of thought is historical, one is scriptural, and one is philosophical and theological.

First, Lev, a Roman Catholic, argues that as the Middle Ages transitioned into the Renaissance, nature, the body, and human action came to be viewed with a dignity and an honor they had not previously been thought to possess. They thus became worthy sites of meditation in the language of art. As the dignity of the human person and the created order became more embedded in the social imaginary, it was no longer thought that to portray God the Father with a human body

besmirched his dignity.

Second, according to the Orthodox theologian Fr. Steven Bigham, the "loss of the sense of typology between the Old and the New Testaments has serious effects even in the realm of art history." With the emerging historical consciousness in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, "theology became subordinate to history." The Old Testament was no longer viewed as a set of shadow symbols whose eternal reality is shown forth in full clarity in the New Testament, but as a record of historical events in the deep past. The appearance of the Son in the Old Testament, then, would more likely have been interpreted as an anachronism. This new understanding of the Old and New Testaments, at least in terms of typology, combined with the burgeoning desire among artists to daringly express visual frontiers hitherto unexplored. The Renaissance masters were more interested in expanding the threshold of representation than in remaining within the boundaries of tradition, giving rise in the end to a willingness—an eagerness, even—to clothe "the divinity with form and substance."

Third, the Protestant art historian Matthew Milliner connects this willingness to depict the Father visually with Duns Scotus's notion of the univocity of being. If God possesses the quality of being just as any other being does—if the Creator's existence is in the same category as the existence of his creatures—then he becomes an object within "the sphere of knowledge." Visual circumscription of the invisible God thus becomes thinkable.

Again, these explanations are very rough, and the last of them, at least, would be controversial among scholars. But whatever the interplay of cause and effect, whatever the mechanisms of change, *something* profound shifted underfoot over the course of five hundred years, and no explicit theological rationale was demanded or given. In the West by the sixteenth century, the prohibition against graven images seems to have been fully overturned.

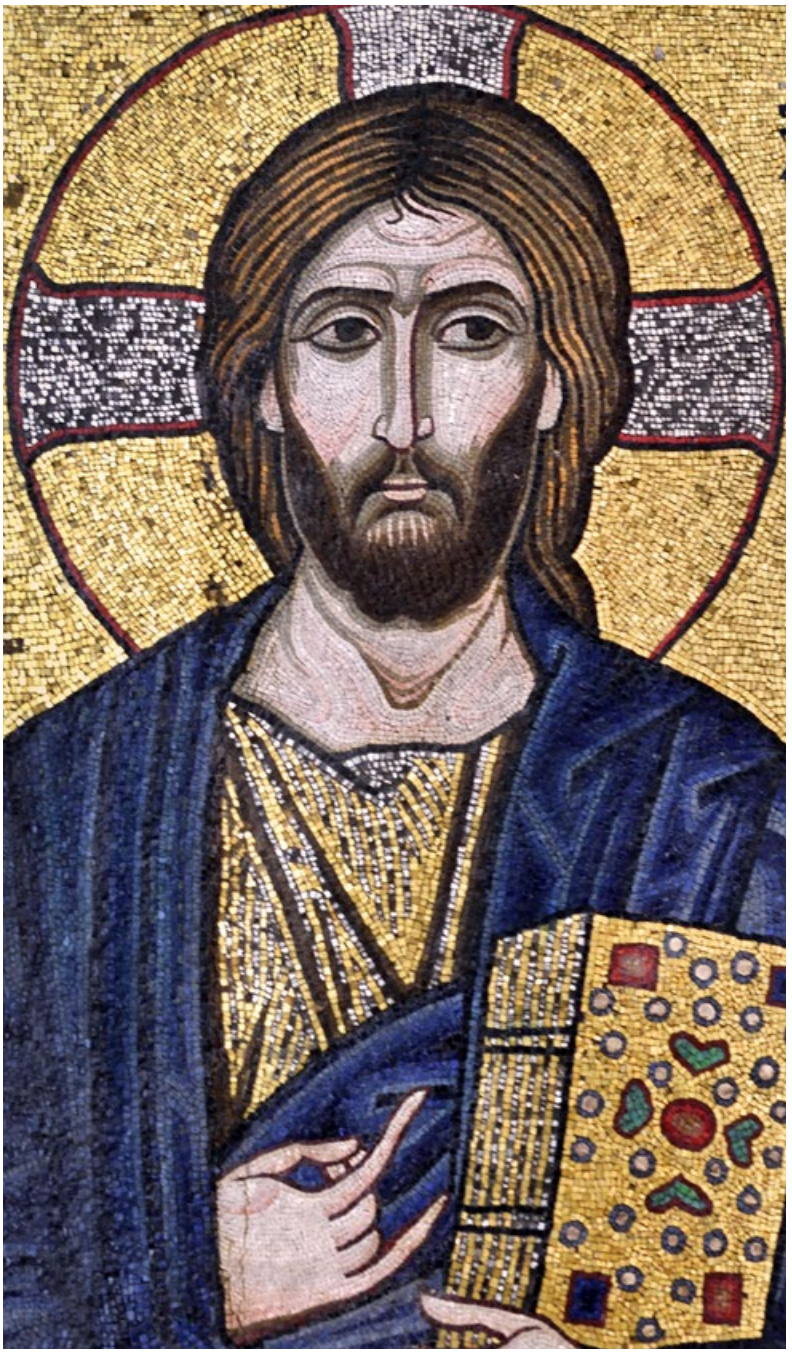
So perhaps the Reformers had a right to be cranky. But they disagreed among themselves about the place of art in Christianity. Luther retained a positive role for images in the Church, relegating them to "adiaphora"—things indifferent to essential matters of faith. Calvin, of course, would brook no modulation of the commandment against graven images into the key of the new covenant. In his zeal to rid the Church of its abuse of divine images, he swept away not only the Western tradition of ecclesiastical art but also the distinction between veneration and worship enshrined in the Second Nicene Council. For Calvin, the human propensity for idol-making is simply too strong to be controlled by such sophistries. It is in his discussion of divine images that Calvin utters his famous phrase that the human heart is a "perpetual factory of idols."

I disagree with Calvin's assessment, but I'm not sure the current moment calls for a complete repudiation of Calvin or a blanket approbation of all images. In the list of topics on which the Orthodox and the Reformed don't see eye to eye, the role of images has to be near the top, and I am not trying to make them agree. But I would like to hazard a deeper continuity, a pious inclination that both traditions recognize even if they finally come to different conclusions. Despite the embrace of iconography among the Orthodox, both parties at Nicaea II in the eighth century—and the Reformed Protestants in Geneva and Zurich nearly a millennium later—took as normative a former prohibition: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image." To say that this commandment was overturned by the Incarnation is not quite right—not right at all in fact. The two bounds of divine representation articulated by John of Damascus and the Orthodox party in the iconoclastic controversy in the eighth century still pertain: the faithful are not to represent as God things that are not God; and the faithful are not to represent as God a God who is by definition unrepresentable. With the Incarnation, the invisible suddenly existed under the conditions of the visible. The second person of the Trinity became, in the words of Jaroslav Pelikan, "susceptible of portrayal." But the Father did not.

Both the Orthodox and the Reformed have handed on a sense of restraint—the Reformed by damming up the impulse to represent the divine, and the Orthodox by providing bounds, like the banks of a river, to guide the course of valid representation. Their methods diverge, to be sure, but not radically, not at the root.

In the Age of the Screen, however, *any* representation of Christ or the Father or the Spirit or the Trinity is permissible, and we now have buddy Jesus and golden retriever Jesus and surfer Jesus and all kinds of other Jesuses, to say nothing of images of the Father produced by Titian or Dürer or Michelangelo or Monty Python. The prohibition of the commandment has been overturned and the levies of tradition have been dismantled. The river of images has overflowed its banks, and we are awash in depictions of the face of God.

Both the Orthodox and the Reformed have handed on a sense of restraint—the Reformed by damming up the impulse to represent the divine, and the Orthodox by providing bounds to guide the course of valid representation.



Christ the Merciful mosaic icon, twelfth century

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

It would be easy to assume that the ubiquity of images in modern society dilutes their potency, that because of their overwhelming pervasiveness we have become immune to their power. But it would be more accurate to say that the ubiquity of images anaesthetizes us to their effects. The power of representational images has not diminished; we are simply less aware of it.

So the impulse to hold back at Christ's face that the Reformed tradition has given my friend—I think that's healthy. It acknowledges that a restriction remains theologically prior to visual permissiveness. My Reformed friends understand the power of the image. They understand the possibility of damage caused by our undisciplined gaze.

Still, if a false image has the capacity for corruption, a true image has the capacity for transfiguration. The Reformed tradition may help us avoid the former, but it also precludes the latter. It is the tempered refinement of the Orthodox iconographic tradition that best holds in tension the potent double capacity of divine images. An icon-painter who produces true icons does not depict the truth of the Church's spiritual realities by learning or copying techniques, or through talent or creativity. An icon-painter represents those realities by sublimating his own contemplation directly into a theological visual language. One can contemplate the divine in icons because they are themselves contemplations of the divine. For this reason the saints and the fathers of the Church are considered icon-painters every bit as much as the craftsmen who produce the physical images. The one who produces a true icon of Christ—whether in life or on an icon board—cannot have contemplated those realities without opening his spirit to them through the purification of his vision. "His eyes," says Bigham, "must be transfigured to see the transfigured world."

This is the transfiguration that is visited upon Obadiah Elihue Parker, who in his suffering becomes an image of the image he bears. When he reaches home after getting his tattoo, he becomes suffused with the gaze of the Byzantine Christ: "All at once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts." Parker's wife, however, is an iconoclast of a particularly unreflective variety, refusing to admit the penetration of God's presence into the mundane world. As a result, she does not recognize Christ in the image ("It ain't anybody I know"), and denies her husband's newfound union with him. When she witnesses his new birth (at the end of the story he is "leaning against the tree, crying like a baby"), her eyes, which have been described twice as icepicks, harden "still more," and she screams idolatry and beats Parker on the back with a broom. The blows that wound the image of Christ permanently inscribed on Parker's body wound him as well, thus drawing him into a literal conformity with the sufferings of Christ.

JEFF REIMER *is an editor at* Comment *magazine.*

PETER HORREE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Two Poems by Brian Swann

THE MAN

Moon's up, flinging
bits of herself out
into the void where

stars sting, flint,
fer-de-lance, bloom
like neurons,

neuroses, till dawn
spills over a line
of migrating sandpipers

skimming the swell
as the tide turns
leaving froth, wrack,

detritus and at the
water's edge a man
leaving no prints.

THE MARE

Wind ground down,
dropped into the west.

This morning orders
came from the east:

everything stay where
it is. Trees freeze.

The waterfall stops,
painted on rock.

I open the window to what's
in silence. Thrush,

flute, nothing, just
me and the old mare,

head to wind, facing
the snow, flicking it

from her flanks, nostrils
wide, breathing it in.

BRIAN SWANN *'s most recent poetry collection is* Sunday Out of Nowhere: New and Selected Poems *(Sheep Meadow Press) and his latest fiction is* Huskanaw *(MadHat Press). He teaches at Cooper Union in New York City.*

Signs of the Sacred

James T. Kloppenberg

Hans Joas on faith in a secular time

American democracy is in trouble. The voices that command the most attention are those at the ends of the political spectrum. Extremists on the Right cling to the illusion that Joe Biden is an illegitimate president who must be opposed at every turn, just as Barack Obama was. Tough-minded insurgents on the Left insist that the time for compromise and concessions has passed because it is impossible to reason, let alone bargain, with people in the grip of feverish delusions.

Something similar is infecting European nations. Long governed by big-tent parties of the center Left and the center Right, nations such as Germany, France, and even Britain are now fragmenting as never before, and not only on the margins. Even the mainstream parties are splintering. Recent elections in Germany and the Netherlands demonstrated this dynamic with particular clarity. Germany's Social Democrats and Christian Democrats, the long-dominant forces of stability that appealed to a wide range of voters, no longer command even a third of the electorate. No party in Germany or the Netherlands attracted more than 25 percent of the vote. Putting together coalition governments is harder than ever at a time when partisan wrangling is intense and compromise has become a dirty word.

Hans Joas

ZIKO VAN DIJK/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The voice of Hans Joas, a brilliant and wide-ranging social theorist who splits his time between his native Germany and the United States, is particularly valuable at this time of dueling dogmatisms. Joas's work in sociology, history, politics, and philosophy constitutes a singular contribution to contemporary thought. How should we understand human experience after the linguistic turn? Why do we value what we value? How can believers respond to the narrative of secularization when religious observance appears to be collapsing in the North Atlantic West? To all these urgent questions Joas offers arresting answers.

The list of Joas's published work runs to fifty-three pages. His work has been translated into almost every European language and several others. He has held prestigious lectureships and fellowships across the globe. A lifelong Catholic, Joas has written widely about religion and its critics. He has been invited to participate in Germany's Synodal Way, which might lead to a rethinking and reorientation of the Catholic Church in Germany. Long active in Germany's anti-nuclear and peace movements, Joas also serves on a steering committee that helps shape the program of the German Social Democratic Party.

But above all Joas is a social theorist. In his many books and articles, he has drawn on multiple sources, including the German traditions of philosophical idealism descended from G.F.W. Hegel, the multi-dimensional tradition of Marxism, the hermeneutics of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey, the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the Frankfurt School of critical theory that originated with Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer and continues to develop in the voluminous writings of Jürgen Habermas and his successor, Axel Honneth. As a scholar of sociology, Joas has repeatedly turned to the founding giants of that discipline, notably Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel. Among theologians, Joas has drawn less from Hans Küng and Joseph Ratzinger than from Ernst Troeltsch—perhaps appropriately for someone who currently holds the Ernst Troeltsch Chair for the Sociology of Religion at Humboldt University in Berlin.

Most striking, though, is Joas's profound indebtedness to the American tradition of philosophical pragmatism, which he describes as "the unbroken guiding thread" of his work. In his first book, *George Herbert Mead* (German 1980; English 1985), Joas helped return that pioneering sociologist and philosopher to the center of contemporary sociology. In later books, *The Creativity of Action* (German 1992; English 1996) and *The Genesis of Values* (German 1997; English 2000), Joas turned to William James and John Dewey. He credited James, accurately, with being the first to discover the phenomenology of immediate, pre-reflective experience, particularly but not exclusively religious experience. Although that tradition is often traced to Edmund Husserl and those whom he influenced, the origins of phenomenology lay in James's landmark *Principles of Psychology* (1890) and his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). In *The Power of the Sacred: An Alternative to the Narrative of Disenchantment*—the most recent of his books

In light of that sustained skepticism about the very possibility of universal norms, the question of values has become increasingly problematic, so problematic that most scholars now simply avoid asking the question.

to be translated into English—Joas completes his investigation of the pragmatist tradition by explaining why Charles S. Peirce's semiotics is a necessary complement to the ideas offered by Mead, James, and Dewey. He also explains why, for many believers, religious faith is constitutive rather than dispensable, and why the narrative of secularization has become more problematic than many agnostics and atheists admit.

Born in Munich in 1948, Joas grew up in a Catholic workers' housing cooperative in Munich, where strict religious observance was taken for granted. Joas grew up admiring—and depending on—the neighborliness of the cooperative where his family continued to live; as a teen he gravitated toward radical Catholic social theory and action. Although education offered an escape from his family's poverty, he felt alienated not only by the well-to-do students who predominated in his gymnasium and at the University of Munich and the Free University of Berlin, but also by the dogmatism, intolerance, and doctrinaire Marxism of the student Left. In Berlin he worked to reconcile his strongest intellectual influences: post–Vatican II Catholicism, Marxism and other forms of radical democratic social and political theory, and the German tradition of philosophical hermeneutics. In his mature scholarly work, he has done just that.

For his book on George Herbert Mead, which began as a dissertation, Joas excavated Mead's previously unknown immersion in, and indebtedness to, the work of German thinkers including Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, and especially Dilthey, with whom, Joas found, Mead had studied in Berlin. Joas also located Mead in the context of early twentieth-century American social thought, which was suffused with the ideas of pragmatists James and Dewey. Mead considered his pivotal idea of intersubjectivity, in Joas's words, to be nothing less than "the transformation of fundamental Christian assumptions into social psychology and ethics." Whereas secular scholars could interpret the word "transformation" to indicate that Mead was abandoning no longer tenable Christian ideals, the word could just as easily be understood to mean, in Joas's words, "a contemporary articulation of belief." In that ambiguity lies much that has remained tantalizing in Joas's scholarship.

Why do we value what we value? Why are our goals our goals? For some people, who have always taken for granted the ideals they cherish, or who see them as God-given, eternal, universal truths, enshrined from time immemorial and impossible or irrational to doubt or to challenge, such questions might seem decidedly odd. *Of course* we value what we value. Our values are immune to questioning. They are God's will, or natural law, or the self-evident truths proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence. For well over a century, though, ever since books such as Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morals* exploded conventional ideas of morality, most academic philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic have denied that we can establish, through reasoned argument, any immutable truths beyond the truths of mathematics and symbolic logic. Questions of ethics, or of social and political philosophy, have been expelled from the domain of philosophy proper and consigned to the realm of taste or opinion. Such questions are answered in different ways at different times in different cultures. Although idiosyncratic preferences, in this view, are gussied up as something compelling or law-like, the obvious relativity of values across different times and cultures exposes the brittleness, indeed the futility, of all such efforts.

Metaethics, the study of the formal properties of ethical argument and the assumptions that lie behind those arguments, has been a lively field of inquiry, but moral philosophers have struggled to convince skeptics within and beyond their discipline that genuinely universal ethical principles exist. Even John Rawls, in his later work *Political Liberalism* (1991), revised his earlier attempt, in *A Theory of Justice* (1971), to establish principles of justice for any people other than "us," meaning members of late-twentieth-century North Atlantic cultures. Anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists are said to have disclosed the particularity of Western logic and all cultural, social, and individual standards, mores, and choices. Whereas the existence of bedrock standards was long taken for granted, in recent centuries drilling straight through such bedrock has been the objective of the human sciences.

In light of that sustained skepticism about the very possibility of universal norms, the question of values has become increasingly problematic, so problematic that most scholars now simply avoid asking the question and proceed along the more or less taken-for-granted assumptions that govern academic inquiries. If brain chemistry, genetic inheritance, simple self-interest, or inherited and unexamined religious or ideological premises lie behind human behavior, then questions of what people might naïvely *think* motivates them are beside the point.

Joas disagrees. He thinks recent figures in the mainstream of European and American social theory have misunderstood human experience because many of its most influential figures have followed the lead of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. In his familiar typology, Weber divided action-orientation into four types: instrumental rationality (means/end reasoning), value rationality (reasoning in line with ethical ideals, including religious ideals), tradition (following longstanding customs), and affect (acting from emotion or aesthetic preference). And Weber elevated instrumental rationality above all the others. He believed means-ends reasoning to be the kind of reasoning most characteristic of modernity; the others were atavistic. For Durkheim, religion was significant because

it provided, through ritual, occasions for "collective effervescence," experiences that enable individuals to see themselves linked with something bigger, something outside their daily existence. The problem with both Weber and Durkheim, from Joas's perspective, was their failure to acknowledge what American pragmatists placed at the center of their arguments, something Joas addressed in the book he considers "his most ambitious," *The Creativity of Action.*

There Joas argues that all intentional action has a creative aspect. Moreover, there is a reciprocal relation between means and ends, both of which change as the action is being carried out. Dewey in particular saw the "fluidity or changeability" of "ends in view" as well as the fluidity of our sense of the steps necessary to reach them. He saw that agents actively engage in modifying the means and the ends of action whether that action is instrumental or moral. We do not, Joas contends, separate our actions into Weber's four ideal types, nor do we blindly follow or mechanically adopt Durkheim's ritualized forms of behavior. No matter how strictly choreographed such behaviors are, individuals impute particular meanings to them and perform them in their own way. Whether a *Commonweal* reader is accustomed to reading each issue cover to cover, for example, or selects which articles to read and which to skip, she is making judgments—and acting creatively—with every page she turns. The meanings she extracts from what she reads are also her own, which anyone who has ever discussed an article or book with other readers knows from experience. When Catholics attend Mass, most now experience the rituals in their own distinctive ways, which depend on their prior experiences, their attitude toward the hierarchy, the clergy, and Catholic teachings, their understandings of the sacrament of the Eucharist, and many other factors. Joas's ideas about the creativity of action might account for those variations better than some other alternatives.

Joas's concept of immediate experience—pre-reflective, inescapably social, and value-laden—draws directly on the writings of James and Dewey. In his *Principles of Psychology*, James challenged the dualisms of mind/body and self/other that had dominated philosophy since Descartes. As a scientist trained in anatomy and physiology, James had to take seriously the physical dimension of experience. But having survived his brush with suicide because he was "able to sustain a thought because I *choose* to when I might have other thoughts," he knew that neither philosophical nor biological determinism could account for the most important experience of his life, his experience of free will. Thus James balanced precariously on the knife edge of what he called "pure experience." Later philosophers, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Joas, would call it phenomenology.

James recognized that our emotions "must always be inwardly what they are, whatever be the physiological source of their apparition." In other words, our feelings "carry their own inner measure of worth with them." Equally important was James's path-breaking concept of the "stream of consciousness," which helped revolutionize painting as well as literature through the efforts of James's former student Gertrude Stein and others. Consciousness, James insisted, "flows." The past intrudes into every present moment, as do anticipations of what will happen next. We do not experience the world as chopped into bits but instead as a whole. Moreover, "the important thing about a train of thought is its conclusion." That is the *meaning* of that thought, "what abides" when everything else has faded. That abiding quality, Joas argues, is inseparable from the work of creativity that engages every human at almost every moment.

From Dewey's early essay "The Reflex Arc," Joas takes the idea of experience as a "circuit" rather than a separable "stimulus" and "response." The experiencing subject, Dewey argued, ties together what is experienced, "because the motor response determines the stimulus, just as truly as sensory stimulus determines movement." That "organic" process also makes it impossible to separate out the valuing that goes on at every instant, the "interpreting" of every stimulus and every response, which Joas takes as another indication of the value-laden creativity of action.

There is one further dimension of experience and action as Joas conceives of it: its social dimension. No human being, James pointed out in his *Principles of Psychology*, ever came into existence on his own, or ever had a single experience as an isolated, atomistic individual. From that insight Mead developed the linchpin of his sociology, the concept of the individual self developing only through interaction with other selves. Mead's emphasis on what Joas calls "the *primary sociality* of the actor," or the "practical intersubjectivity" of all human life, lies behind Joas's conviction that just as experience conceived phenomenologically is always creative and value-laden, so is it always and undeniably social.

Given the centrality of American pragmatists' insights to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Alfred Schutz, and their importance for the emergence of Gestalt psychology in the interwar years, readers might wonder why earlier European thinkers failed to grasp the significance of James, Dewey, and Mead. Explaining that absence is Joas's goal in *Pragmatism and Social Theory* (1993). Joas argues that, from the late eighteenth century onward, creativity in German thought was channeled into the aesthetic realm—into the work of poets, painters, and composers rather than the everyday experience of ordinary individuals. That tendency reached its apogee in Nietzsche's celebration of the artist's creativity and his contempt for almost everyone and everything else. On the other hand, many of the early interpreters of pragmatism, including Durkheim and the Frankfurt School, failed to grasp the similarities between the pragmatists' critical project and Nietzsche's. The stark differences between Nietzsche's nihilistic insistence on nothing more than "another mask," on the one hand, and the pragmatists' focus on solving the problems that he—and they—identified in earlier philosophical traditions, on the other, obscured the meaning and significance of their ideas.

The caricatures of James and Dewey offered by some early enthusiasts for pragmatism, including Mussolini's close associate Giovanni Gentile, caused other European thinkers to dismiss the pragmatists as simple-minded positivists and vulgar, scientistic celebrants of Americans' "can-do" spirit. That lack of understanding, as Joas points out, meant that pragmatists' valuable insights were submerged beneath twentieth-century European intellectuals' propensity for denigrating all things American. Notoriously evident in Horkheimer and Adorno's widely read but outrageously inaccurate account of pragmatism in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Eclipse of Reason,* that tendency was also apparent in Europeans' enthusiasm for what Joas calls the late-twentieth-century "Heideggerianization" of American thought apparent in the Nietzsche-tinged writings of Richard Rorty. Although Rorty claimed the mantle of pragmatism, Joas points out that Rorty's allergy to the idea of experience and his relentless insistence of the primacy of language showed the distance separating him from James, Dewey, and Mead.

A similar misappropriation marked the use of pragmatism by Habermas, the most influential European social theorist of the past six decades. Although Habermas has called himself "a good Deweyan pragmatist," he built his monumental oeuvre around the armature of "undistorted communication," the idea that all language use is oriented toward the horizon of mutual comprehension. Joas points out that despite entitling his major work *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas envisioned interaction in a way that narrowed it down to a particular kind of language use. For that reason Habermas has overlooked much of what James, Dewey, and Mead aimed to achieve by conceptualizing experience as they did. Whereas Habermas elevated the idea of communicative rationality to the pinnacle of his theory, the early pragmatists incorporated the body, emotions, creativity, and values into their phenomenology. From Joas's perspective, Habermas's emphasis on language, much like Rorty's, caused him to miss the depth and complexity of intersubjectivity.

In *The Creativity of Action*, Joas argued that values are an indispensable dimension of intentional action, but his critics faulted him for failing to explain the origin of those values. That would be the subject of his next book, *The Genesis of Values*. After examining recent efforts by philosophers and social scientists to answer this question, Joas turned to the analysis of value formation in James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Unsatisfied by attempts to explain religious experiences scientifically, James explored accounts of how individuals came to feel themselves in contact with a power that enabled them to discern, and perhaps to bridge, the gap between their present selves and their ideal selves. For James, that awareness was the genesis of values, and it came about not through philosophy, theology, churches, or rituals, but instead through powerful pre-reflective experiences that Joas calls "self-opening," "self-surrender," or "self-transcendence."

Joas likens such experiences to interpersonal love, which can be "shattering" in that it can awaken individuals to the distance between their ideals and what exists. For Dewey, what individuals judge "desirable" emerges through education, understood not as the transmission of information but as the formation of judgment through open-ended inquiry. As we make decisions concerning what steps of creative action are necessary to overcome obstacles or resolve problems, we are constantly reflecting on, and revising, our understanding both of means and of ends. Thus "the desirable" is never fixed; it remains provisional, contingent, subject to revision pending future reflections and judgments on experience. For Dewey, the "religious" is, as it was for James, a category wider than conventional religion. It encompassed various forms of "consummatory experience" that carry individuals beyond things as they are and toward things as they might be, including experiences of the aesthetic and the erotic, as well as experiences of self-opening that can occur in the natural world, in religious rituals or "mystical intuitions," or in "feelings of togetherness that accompany happy, communal life."

Fascism, fundamentalism, totalitarianism, authoritarianism (including that of the pre–Vatican II Catholic Church), and Soviet Communism all threatened the ethos of experimentation that Dewey associated with the authentically religious. For that reason Dewey "sacralized" democracy. Although Joas judges the "empty universalism of the democratic ideal" too "weak and abstract" to motivate action, he endorses Dewey's view that values originate in "the creative work of our imagination." He agrees with Mead that developing the capacity for empathic "role-taking" responds to the "universal need for the normative regulation of human cooperation." For that reason Joas contends that nurturing this capacity—and the social conditions that best facilitate its development—is of the highest priority.

How can we develop the capacity for empathy without succumbing to the moral and cultural relativism that Joas finds incoherent? Even those who claim to prize tolerance above all, he argues, require standards to which they can appeal to justify that position. It is to these questions that Joas has directed much of his recent work, including not only his study of the origins of human rights, *The Sacredness of the Person*, but also his ambitious critique of secularization, *The Power of the Sacred*.

Joas argues that we must get past the dueling narratives of secularization and anti-secularization. Among the principal professional projects undertaken by the first generation of social scientists was the argument that religion would fade away. Its place in modern cultures would be taken by a new high priesthood, social scientists themselves. Many of these pioneering social scientists, in Europe and in the United States, were themselves religious, and they saw their work as augmenting rather than supplanting the work of traditional churches. Others, however, such as Weber and Durkheim, agreed with Marx that religion was but an indefensible holdover of the superstitions that had led the earliest human communities to see the natural world, and humans' place in it, as the gods'

If the claim that secularization is an inevitable feature of modernity is no longer tenable, neither can believers assume that they alone have access to the truth.

handiwork. Now that scientists from Newton to Darwin had disclosed the mechanisms governing the physical world and the process whereby humans had evolved from other forms of life, rationality could take the place of such illusions.

A century later, Joas observes, such predictions seem considerably less persuasive. Although religious observance in Western Europe and the United States has clearly declined, in much of the rest of the world Christianity, Islam, and other traditional forms of religious faith have persisted or even surged in popularity. Thus we need another approach, which Joas first outlined in *Faith as an Option* (German 2012; English 2014). "A sphere is opening up," he writes, in which believers and nonbelievers alike "can articulate their experiences and assumptions and relate them to one another." If the claim that secularization is an inevitable feature of modernity is no longer tenable, neither can believers assume that they alone have access to the truth. Joas holds out what he calls "faith as an option," a formulation influenced by Charles Taylor's account of the rise of a secular option, an account that might leave both believers and nonbelievers dissatisfied. As Josiah Royce quipped when confronted with William James's "will to believe," when the gods are demonstrable only as hypotheses, they are no longer gods.

Yet Joas insists that conceiving of faith as an "option" offers an alternative to the rival dogmatisms of religious traditionalists and "new atheists" such as Richard Dawkins. In *The Power of the Sacred*, he modifies his earlier accounts of religion by supplementing the arguments of James, Dewey, and Mead with the semiotics of the fourth founding pragmatist, Charles S. Peirce. We need to move beyond James's account of religious experience, Joas now argues, and "link the psychology of religion with semiotics, the theory of signs." Although our immediate religious experiences, our encounters with the sacred, may be pre-linguistic, we require language to write or talk about those experiences. Even our self-knowledge, our reflections on our experiences and their meaning, depends on signs, for which Peirce offered insights more useful than those of James.

The German thinkers who had drawn most directly from pragmatism, Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel, had emphasized for just this reason the importance of Peirce's ideas more than those of the other early pragmatists. Thus Joas's turn to Peirce (and to Royce) constitutes a notable modification of his ideas. When individuals reflect on and interpret pre-reflective experiences, they depend on linguistic tools, and culturally shaped and shared understandings, to communicate that experience. Again, it is the multi-dimensionality, plasticity, and variability of that language and those understandings that Joas is at pains to emphasize.

In light of the undeniable fact of steady secularization in the North Atlantic, believers should try to articulate the meaning and significance of their faith in terms comprehensible (if not necessarily persuasive) to nonbelievers. Committed secularists should do the same. In a splendid forthcoming book on secularization and the stubborn persistence of belief in the United States, *Christianity's American Fate*, historian David Hollinger models the forbearance that Joas has in mind. Although Hollinger insists that the more education people have, the less likely they are to invoke the supernatural to explain events, he acknowledges that some individuals manage to balance their faith with their commitment to the life of the mind.

Joas thinks he can explain that phenomenon. Central to his argument in *The Power of the Sacred* is his contention that what Durkheim identified as "the sacred" and associated with religious rituals should be understood to have a permanent place in all societies. "Sacredness," Joas argues, "also exists, outside of institutionalized religions, in a wide variety of forms, and underlies the development of all ideals, including secular ones." As Durkheim himself acknowledged, ideas such as "progress" or "democracy" become sacred for those who believe in them, and rituals of various kinds emerge to give believers the occasion to practice their faith. Joas argues that such rituals create "a controlled environment that temporarily suspends the mechanisms of everyday life. Ideal states can thus be rendered experienceable, in such a way that individuals remember them as intensive experiences when they have returned to the realm of the quotidian."

Ideal formation, at least as Joas sees it, is universal, whether it takes the form of religion or not, and it can happen in experiences ranging from prayer to play. Unlike Durkheim, who limited occasions of "collective effervescence" to totemic rituals, or Habermas, who grudgingly admits the importance of religious traditions even though he contrasts such "archaic" holdovers to his ideal of "rational argumentational discourse," Joas insists on the continuing salience of "individual experiences of love, of fusion with nature, of sexuality, or of shattering compassion." Exiling from the process of ideal formation everything except rational linguistic communication, as Joas argues that Habermas does, impoverishes our understanding of the richness and variety of our lives as humans. Do we really want a utopia without music, poetry, dance, theater, sports—or sex?

Together with Robert Bellah, Joas has also written about the "axial age," the era when the world's great religions took shape around universalistic rather than particularistic values. Christianity (like Buddhism and Confucianism) stressed the value of every human being and thus challenged prevailing hierarchies and exclusions—in principle if less often in practice. Although the ideals of these religions contrasted with existing standards, and also with individuals' practical needs

and prevailing political and social norms, such ideals nevertheless persist as permanent challenges to all cultures that pay lip service to them. Ideals such as equality and responsibility have a similar significance: they unsettle us by asking whether we are willing to take steps to realize the ideals we claim to cherish. In certain circumstances at least, humans have advanced "to an idea of 'transcendence' that points beyond all this-worldly 'sacredness.'" That, Joas concludes, is simply "a fact," and that continuing process, he contends, shows why Weber's influential concept of "disenchantment" fails to convince. The process of ideal formation is every bit as vibrant in post-religious cultures as in religious ones.

The historian Michael Saler and scholars in the field of science studies have shown that the idea of "demagification" is a myth. Whether in natural- or social-scientific or political communities, even those proudly and self-consciously devoted to rational inquiry do not always proceed rationally. The concept of disenchantment is, from Joas's perspective, "wholly inadequate" to describe a "vital, basic attitude of the human being, in which the world is experienced as being of value. When human beings perform an activity they enjoy for its own sake, as in the case of play or work they relish, they are not projecting anything." Neither are they "succumbing to illusions," nor are they "victims of a spell from which they ought to emancipate themselves." Our "everyday experience of a value-laden world" is neither transitory nor a function of belief in the divine. It is instead universal, as James argued in *The Principles of Psychology* a decade before turning his attention to religious experience. If the world lacked meaning and value for us, we would care nothing about it. The "pre-reflective constitution of meaning" is instead what humans do, and will continue to do, whether or not that "sacralization" takes the form of conventional religion or some other form.

The emergence of human rights as a global ideal after World War II illustrates this perennial process. Joas readily admits what historian Samuel Moyn has hammered home: proclamations of human rights have often merely masked nations' continuing tendency to maneuver for power rather than address the problem of continuing oppression and exploitation. But like the emergence of anti-slavery discourse in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Joas argues, the emergence of human-rights talk reflects changing ideas in both religious and secular communities. It signals a further broadening of what historian Thomas Haskell, in an effort to explain why anti-slavery agitation emerged, called the "horizon of responsibility" so that it encompasses not only one's own family, or tribe, or nation, or race, or the enslaved, but everyone.

That process, which Joas examines in *The Sacredness of the Person*, shows how new ideals can seep into and transform what was taken for granted, upsetting ways of thinking and practices long assumed to be unproblematic. The persistence of poverty, as well as the persistence of child labor, sexual trafficking, and the death penalty surely illustrate the limits of the commitment laid out in the United Nations Charter, even though almost all nations (the United States is a notorious exception) now profess to honor the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Such long-acceptable practices now count as scandalous. Campaigns exist to eradicate them, just as earlier abolitionists worked to eradicate slavery. Joas interprets such efforts as evidence of the continuing formation of ideals, with or without religious sponsorship or sanction. Despite the persistence of injustice, many of the same people who have turned away from religion have shown a willingness to sacrifice, a "readiness to master and suppress desires and immediate bodily needs," for a variety of different reasons. Compelling new ideals continue to emerge. New experiences bring together people who no longer share the common bonds formerly supplied by religious congregations. Joas is not proposing a singular process akin to Weber's notion of world-historical rationalization, the supposed triumph of instrumental reason over all other forms, or Habermas's struggle of the "lifeworld" to stave off "colonization by the technostructure." By "sacralization" Joas means instead "a complex and unpredictable plethora of such processes," most crucially the history of the ideal of moral universalism.

In the closing pages of *The Power of the Sacred*, Joas lays bare his own normative commitments. First, he contends that "moral universalism is fundamentally superior to moral particularism." Even those who profess to value toleration and difference above anything else are making a "non-relativist judgment," which is a kind of universalism whether they admit it or not. Second, by suggesting an alternative to the narrative of disenchantment, Joas has in mind nothing like a value-free description but is instead aiming to transcend "all forms of moral particularism" and to offer an alternative, grounded in human experience and judgment, that can motivate respect for the "dignity of every individual." Finally, Joas concedes that such a commitment does not and cannot resolve the inevitable tension between our obligations to those closest to us, our families, and our aspirations to moral universalism. The challenge that Jesus issued to those who would follow him will remain as haunting as ever.

Religious people with a traditional understanding of their faith and the imperatives of religious doctrine may find Joas's account of ideal-formation as unsatisfying as Royce found James's ideas. Yet for other early twenty-first-century believers, marooned in secular communities in which their faith is considered either incomprehensible or a quaint holdover from earlier eras, Joas's ideas about the meaningful, value-laden quality of immediate experience, the creativity of all action, the generation of values through sacralization, and the elusive quest to honor the sacredness of all persons might represent a coherent, even inspiring, body of ideas.

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RODIN'S 'ADAM'

…the tragic pleasure of admiration.
Rodin

John Moessner

He emerges from that stone womb stumbling,
yet still, with rocky sleep in his eyes, a lingering
curl in the toes. Life-struck, he's cast into
the bronze light of first morning. The wild beauty
of a fig tree seen for the first time, the strange
softness of grass, sharp contrast from the rock
his foot is anchored to. Rodin captured the spastic
flex in the unfolding, the softening of metallic lines
into the run of the calf, the blooming tufts of hair.
He's the best and the worst of us. The first to feel alone,
the first to cast blame, the last to know the light
of eternal day. His eyes contain both the blank gaze
and the shadow from his brow furrowed
in ugly confusion. Does he feel death in the marrow,
buried in his breath? Does he sense his capacity
for grief, the sunken joy in that first place?
The knowing finger points down. Hiding in the clay,
there is always something holding us back,
a catch in the breath, the muscles never relax.

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Asking the Right Questions

An interview with Meghan Sullivan and Paul Blaschko

Since 2015, philosophers Meghan Sullivan and Paul Blaschko have taught "God and the Good Life," the most popular undergraduate course at the University of Notre Dame. They spoke recently with assistant editor Griffin Oleynick about their new book based on that course, The Good Life Method: Reasoning Through the Big Questions of Happiness, Faith, and Meaning. *This interview has been edited for clarity and length.*

GRIFFIN OLEYNICK: You write that two of the best tools for leading a good life are learning to ask good questions and learning to have good conversations. What are the characteristics of each?

MEGHAN SULLIVAN: The ability to ask better questions is something we spend a lot of time on with our students, and in fact it's something we grade them on. We get this from Socrates, who was killed by the Athenian government in 399 BC for asking too many questions.

One of the distinctions we make early on is that questions can be used either *for* or *against* other people. In our political life right now, we find many examples of what we call the "prosecutor question." It's aimed to get somebody on record as having a certain view or position so that you can then critique or attack it. Imagine that I see Paul and that I really want to get into it with him about why he's a vegetarian. I'd say, "Hey, Paul, just asking, why do you hate eating animals so much?" That's not really a question because it presupposes that I already know what Paul's going to say. I just want him to put his reasons on the table so I can argue with him.

Instead, a philosophical question is what we call a "dinner-party question," and it gets a conversation going. It's been a while since a lot of us have been to dinner parties, but at a really great dinner, the host will ask the group an open-ended question in order to try to learn something about someone in the room they don't already know.

So suppose I wanted to ask Paul a dinner party question about his views on animals and food. I might ask, "Paul, when was the first time in your life you remember having a view about why the food you eat might matter?" I don't know what Paul's going to say next. No matter what, I'm going to learn something about what Paul's reasons are. I'll also learn something about Paul. I'm not thinking about my next moves, or what I'm going to attack. I'm genuinely open to learning something about the world that I don't already know. And that's the art of a philosophical question: curiosity, really wanting to figure things out. Even if Paul and I don't reach a consensus—that rarely happens in philosophy—we're both going to leave having learned something we didn't know before.

PAUL BLASCHKO: At the heart of our course and our philosophical method is an ancient tradition called "virtue ethics." It holds that human beings have some sort of definite function or purpose. In the *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle gives us a fascinating argument: he says that the primary function or purpose of human beings is to *reason*, to reflectively guide our lives. He thinks we all share the same goal: to be happy, and deeply so. This isn't just experiencing feelings of happiness, or what we might call subjective well-being. Aristotle insists that we want to achieve *eudaimonia*, which is a well-ordered, reflectively directed, happy life. And it's not just for ourselves. We're supposed to share it with the people who matter most to us, our family and our friends.

So according to Aristotle this requires us to reflect on the different "excellences" in human life, those things that allow us to achieve our function, happiness, in characteristic ways. Aristotle calls those excellences "virtues." When we explain this to students, we use the analogy of a knife. A knife is designed with a certain function: to cut things. One "virtue" or excellence of a knife is to be sharp. Another is to be made out of metal, or another sturdy material, etc. It's the same with human beings. We can discover what human virtues are by reflecting on our function—that is, on what it takes to be happy, and what happiness consists in.

GO: Why are virtue ethics so important right now? And what's wrong with one competing ethical theory you identify in the book, consequentialism?

MS: When a lot of folks think about ethics, they think about taking a poll. They ask, "What's everybody's current opinion on some controversial issue?" Think about how we might approach the ethics of Facebook. We'd take a survey to see how people think about privacy. Facebook will be acting "ethically" if it tries to make the most people happy about what they think they want most right now.

We've lost touch with the much more significant, two-thousand-year old idea that ethics is a goal we might be *wrong* about in our particular moment in time. We may all have different, even distorted views about why privacy matters. But in fact, there's a much deeper human need—for a private life, for family life, for public life—that's much more complicated than anybody has time to grasp in our current moment. Just trying to see what everybody's thinking right now—ethics as

BARBARA JOHNSTON, NOTRE DAME

Paul Blaschko and Meghan Sullivan

People are always trying to optimize every dimension of their lives: how they spend their free time, how they spend their money, how much they sleep. In a world of constant optimization, we can feel crushed.

the practice of conducting surveys on each other—is a mistake. A really tempting one, especially for democratic people like us, but still a mistake.

Consequentialism, which is taught on many college campuses and is one of the dominant methodologies for approaching ethics today, tries to make our moral lives both significantly harder and significantly easier. The basic idea is something like this. Imagine you're Mark Zuckerberg and you're facing a decision: Should you take Facebook out of existence? Or you're Paul and you're deciding whether you should give up eating meat. Or you're me and you're trying to decide how much money you should give to charity this year.

Consequentialism says there's really only one principle you need to think about: Which of your options is going to have the most morally significant consequence? Usually, you measure significant consequences by how much happiness you put out into the world as a result of your action. That's a version of consequentialism called utilitarianism. Say I've got a choice about where to donate money—either to a local art museum or a charity that's going to cure malaria for children in sub-Saharan Africa. Even though I might enjoy art a little bit more, I'll make more people happy by giving it to the malaria charity. Consequentialism says give it to the malaria charity.

So it makes your life easy, in the sense that it gives you a determinant judgment. But it also makes your life hard because you have to perform this kind calculation every time you make a decision. Maybe I just turn my entire life into this system that redistributes funds to people in need elsewhere. Or maybe I really internalize the message of consequentialism, that my moral worth depends on how consequential my actions are in the world. I can then start to feel the heavy weight of nihilism, realizing that at the end of the day, I don't contribute very much to anything. And so I despair.

We live in a consequentialist world. People are always trying to optimize every dimension of their lives: how they spend their free time, how they act as parents, how they spend their money, how much they use technology, how much they sleep. In a world of constant optimization, we can feel crushed.

GO: There's another, more personal way of analyzing our moral worth and understanding how we make decisions: the philosophical apology. Tell us about that.

PB: The philosophical apology is the big assignment we give our students. We ask them to write down a narrative, a story about their beliefs that also explains why they hold those beliefs. It's a defense—a form that's different from the ways we often use stories in the contemporary world, whether to manipulate each other, to excuse behavior, or to push people around. Instead, by telling you my life story and giving you my reasons for why I believe what I believe, I'm inviting you into the inner conversation that I've been having with myself my whole life. And now we can connect on a deep philosophical level.

We have our students answer four big questions in our course. How should you treat other people? What should you believe? Should you practice a religion? What would make your life meaningful? At the end of the semester (and really throughout the entire course) we get to hear their answers. That's one of the most powerful parts of the class. It's a moment of vulnerability, as well as connection: students resonate with our stories, and with each other's, and they start to see that *this* is the space of philosophy.

There's a risk though: we can deceive ourselves and others through the kinds of stories we tell. Imagine that I'm late for a meeting at work. I walk in and tell my colleagues, "Gosh, there was so much traffic out there, and the roads were icy. Sorry I was late." Here I'm telling a story that takes responsibility off myself, because the world frustrated my virtuous desire to be there on time.

Or I can tell a different story. I can say, "You know what? I was selfish. I slept late, I knew there'd be traffic. I knew I'd probably be late, and I'm sorry for wasting your time." Admittedly, this would be a weird meeting. But the point is that now I'm using a story to take responsibility. It involves what the philosopher Bernard Williams would call a "morally thick" concept—in this case, selfishness. Notice that it's very descriptive: it picks out my motivation, some part of my agency, and makes that an essential part of the story. Now, instead of being a kind of object, where I'm just pushed around by forces beyond my control, I become an agent. This is really important. Elizabeth Anscombe, one of my favorite philosophers, takes this insight as a jumping off point for living the good life and for acting ethically.

GO: You're both Catholic believers, though your faiths arose in different contexts and are inflected in different ways. Why is it philosophically important to ask questions about the existence of God?

MS: We do a disservice to people who are curious about God when we hit them with the really big metaphysical questions and debates right off the bat. Developing authentic religious faith, and finding its role in your understanding of the good life, is really a matter of cultivating small desires, and then larger and more expansive ones.

In our course, we start with really mundane, seemingly everyday questions about what our students are aiming for in their lives. And then we try to get to a deeper level. We ask: What are your goals for loving other people in your life? What does it mean to really care for them? What does it mean to see

and appreciate them, even in the midst of the serious suffering that love sometimes brings into our lives? That leads to questions of meaning: What does it mean to be grateful for these people in your life? These questions of gratitude, as we argue in class and as we've discovered in our own lives, push us to probe even further: Are there things that are bigger than us? Are there forms of good that are even larger than the kinds of things we identify as the best things in our day-to-day life?

That's an opportunity to start to see God, and to see what a desire for God looks like. Once we introduce the idea of God into what's motivating and driving our students' lives, the flood gates open. Questions that we thought were perhaps a bit easier at the beginning of the journey now seem much more complicated.

Our students come from different religious backgrounds and starting points, and it's important that we treat these questions authentically. Almost nobody reads St. Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of God, does the math, and then quickly decides to go and get baptized. For almost anybody that I've met that has religious faith, it was the cultivation of love and appreciation and attention that philosophy came along and fed, asking them the right questions and giving them intriguing hints about what the answer might be. Then theology gave them visions and metaphors and stories, ways of trying to feed that desire. And then they brought themselves and their own experiences and, frankly, their own call from God into their vision of the good life. So we try to honor how that process actually goes in real people's lives, introducing them to philosophers who also honor and critique that process.

PB: One of the most important things that philosophy can add to a religious person's life is a way of engaging the intellect in a really clear, intelligible way. If we're part of a religious community, there may be a temptation to shy away from logical arguments and rigor. We might just say, "Okay, we've figured that out. If we have to debate some outsider or nonbeliever, then fine, we've got the reasons."

But for me, especially in my own life growing up, it was always incredibly important to know why I believed what I believed. It gave me a kind of agency. If somebody came to me and said, "We're Catholic, and this is what the Catholic faith teaches," I could go and say, "Well, wait a second. Does it really? Am I being presented with a true representation of the faith, or does this person just want me to think what they're thinking?" So arguments for God's existence, and the other kinds of philosophical thinking we do around religion, can actually be really empowering for believers.

GO: Paul, you've mentioned the idea of agency repeatedly. Could you tell us what passivity and contemplation can contribute to our understanding of the good life?

PB: As we were writing this book, we were going through the early stages of the pandemic. At that time, Meghan and I had been leading very busy, active, and goal-driven lives, which of course had to be slowly restructured. I vividly remember watching events and appointments just drop off my digital calendar, until it became a blank grid.

In the midst of that kind of experience, you have a miniature crisis. You think, "If those are the things that give my life meaning, if that's what it's all about, what do I do? Should I just put my life on pause for a while? Is there any way of even thinking about what a good life would be when you're forcibly cloistered?"

Philosophy gives us an incredible answer, which is: Yes! And in fact, maybe this is something that you should have been cultivating all along, and here's your opportunity to do it. Philosophy tells us that there is a way of approaching the world contemplatively that's essential, that you can't not do. A quick clarification: I want to contrast this understanding of contemplation with the notion of just relaxing, or chilling out, or taking a vacation. Of course those are important. But in our culture, relaxation and leisure are often in service of the active life: I'm going to take a weekend off so that I can just crush it at work.

That's not what philosophers mean by contemplation. Contemplation is almost a mystical thing. Aristotle says that it draws on the divine part in us, that it's the most divine experience we can have. He ends the *Nicomachean Ethics* by saying that it's ultimately something beyond our grasp, that we're just barely able to do it.

So how do you make this concrete? Well, in our course we turn to the Stoics. I'll tell another story. During the pandemic, I would take a lot of walks, both with Meghan (we're good friends, and live right next to each other) and with my family. One time, I was out with my family and turned the corner. I saw a street full of cherry blossoms, and it just hit me: the scent, the colors, the shapes. I thought, "That's amazing!"

At the time, I'd been reading a lot of Marcus Aurelius. His *Meditations* ponder mundane things like bread and rotting fruit, which he uses as jumping-off points for deeper reflections on topics like mortality. With this in mind, as I looked at the cherry blossoms, I noticed a sadness in myself. I wondered, "Why am I sad? This is beautiful." As I was looking back and forth between the cherry blossoms and my kids I began to think, "I'm already sad because I know that tomorrow the cherry blossoms will be on the ground. They're going to be mushed up, wet, and disgusting."

When I got home, I realized that I'd been letting the anticipation of what was coming intrude on the beauty of the moment. I wasn't allowing myself to be present to it. So I put a little sticky note on my computer: "Things that are beautiful are no less beautiful because they're not permanent." Being reminded of that on a daily basis disposes you differently. It changes your soul. Now, when I look at my kids, I can feel that same disposition of being present, to just see them, to enjoy that community and that life. That's one practical way in which we can start to achieve what philosophers have talked about as a life of contemplation.

GRIFFIN OLEYNICK *is an assistant editor at* Commonweal.

RAND RICHARDS COOPER

Gorgeous to a Fault

'The Power of the Dog'

In 1996, reviewing Jane Campion's *The Portrait of a Lady*, critic David Ansen called it "the kind of failure only a very gifted filmmaker could make," asserting that "like it or not, it haunts you." To my mind, this describes almost all of Campion's films—and none more so than her current work, *The Power of the Dog*, a film that beguiles and baffles in equal measure.

Born in 1954 in New Zealand, Campion left home to attend art school in London, then got a graduate degree in visual arts at the University of Sydney. She has cited Frida Kahlo and Joseph Beuys as influences, and that does not surprise. No matter what Campion tries to do with a movie—no matter what story she tells, in what setting, in what genre—she is all about the atmosphere, a cinematic mood painter who creates images that imprint themselves indelibly on the mind's eye.

Her first full-length film, *Sweetie* (1989), studied a family "falling apart," as the father ruefully notes, "like a wet paper bag." A farce with undercurrents of tragedy and an edge of the absurd, the film is chaotic, presenting a mishmash of tones, dialogue that strings together non-sequiturs, uncertain storytelling, a shift of protagonist one-third of the way through, and a camera that fixates on random objects from disorienting angles. Its treatment of character reveals a lurking sense of futility, as if dialogue can only scratch the surface of something incommunicable at the heart of the human being. A sense of mystery contends with a frustration that afflicts character and viewer alike.

Roger Ebert was shrewd on *Sweetie*'s baffling quality, calling the film a "curious experience" and confessing that he "didn't know what to make of it" at first. "There was something there," he wrote. "I didn't feel much from it, though; the experience seemed primarily cerebral."

Campion went about correcting that in *An Angel at My Table* (1990), a biopic of New Zealand writer Janet Frame. Embracing a more unified storytelling style, the director mined Frame's autobiography to draw significant pathos from the story of the writer's struggle with mental illness. Against the harsh backdrop of medical-institutional abuse overseen by males, including repeated applications of electroshock therapy, Campion developed themes of female power, female imagination and eroticism, and a Woolfean insistence on female space.

These preoccupations informed her masterpiece, *The Piano* (1993), the story of Ada McGrath, a mute woman sold into marriage by her father and shipped—along with her piano—to a jungle plantation in nineteenth-century

New Zealand, where she is inserted into the dark struggles of two men, her new husband and his plantation manager. Showcasing the unforgettable image of men hauling a grand piano through the jungle, Campion depicted both women's silencing and women's power vis-a-vis the violence of men, even as it drilled down to the erotic energies surging beneath the surface of Victorian propriety. The film was *Fitzcarraldo* meets *Heart of Darkness*, turned to feminist purposes. Elective muteness; dismemberment and murder; a game of sexual thrall cued by black keys on a piano: if credible storytelling was sacrificed to trenchant metaphor, or even parable, viewers swept along by the poetic power of the film didn't much care. The movie snagged three Oscars and remains broadly viewed as the greatest film ever made by a woman. "From a distance, *The Piano* seems too preposterous for words," Anthony Lane wrote in the *New Yorker*—then noted that "as Ada knows all too well, words merely get in the way." Describing the film as "inches away from caricature," Lane commented that "a confident director can persuade you of anything," and praised *The Piano* as "so rich in strangeness that the whole movie feels like a voyage." Whatever its faults, he said, "you just want to look."

You just want to look: the same holds true for *The Power of the Dog*, an early favorite among this year's Oscar contenders. Set in the Rocky Mountains of a century ago (though actually filmed in New Zealand), the movie is nothing if not

Kodi Smit-McPhee and Benedict Cumberbatch in *The Power of the Dog* KIRSTY GRIFFIN/NETFLIX

Above, Kirsten Dunst as Rose. Despite its epic Western setting, *The Power of the Dog* is more parlor than prairie.

gorgeous. Already in *Angel at My Table*, Campion had begun to use landscape as presence and formative force—a use she perfected in *The Piano*, where the dense jungle setting amplified the sense of enclosure and steamy threat.

The new film has a burnished look, both sumptuous and stark. Ari Wegner's camera captures scenes of evocative beauty: a lonely prairie graveyard; a herd of cattle kicking up dust clouds; a train steaming across flatlands below massive snowy foothills. Add to that images of decaying wealth captured in a sepulchral, Miss Havisham–like mansion plunked down in the middle of the prairie, and such striking visuals as a woman climbing out of a Model T before a majestic mountain panorama to teach her husband to waltz. Such vivid tableaux—regardless of their dramatic uses—have a stirring life of their own, sometimes in a weirdly *Sound of Music* way. You keep expecting people to burst out singing.

Or murdering. Against the backdrop of natural beauty, Campion orchestrates a parade of human cruelty. The story—taken from Thomas Savage's eponymous 1967 novel—studies Phil and George Burbank, two wealthy brothers running their family's Montana ranch. In this Cain-and-Abel setup, George (Jesse Plemons), who manages the business side of things, is ponderous and kind, while Phil (Benedict Cumberbatch), who runs the ranch hands and leads the cattle drives, is lithe and loud, with a lambent streak of cruelty. Phil's wounding sarcasm includes crass derogations of his brother, whom he contemptuously calls "Fatso," and intensifies when George marries Rose (Kirsten Dunst), a recently widowed innkeeper, and moves her and her teenage son, Peter, into the brothers' mansion.

While Phil's hostility ostensibly reflects suspicion about Rose's designs on the family wealth ("You're just a cheap schemer!" he accuses her), his invective seems to emanate from a deep well of what we would call toxic masculinity, an acrid mixture of misogyny and homophobia. Seizing on the effeminacy of Peter, he incites mockery of the boy among the ranch hands, ridiculing him as "Miss Nancy" and at one point taking a decorative paper flower Peter has made for a dinner party and lighting it on fire. To sharpen the shaming, Phil invokes the legendary figure of Bronco Henry, a long-dead cowboy who taught the Burbank brothers horsemanship—and set them up with prostitutes—and whom Phil worships as the embodiment of manliness. Campion depicts Phil as a slow-burning fuse, capable of igniting male violence at any time—for instance, in the crowded dining room of Rose's

COURTESY OF NETFLIX

inn, where cowboy carousing fueled by alcohol sets Rose on edge, requiring George to defuse things as Phil glowers.

Despite its epic Western setting, *The Power of the Dog* is more parlor than prairie, a Tennessee Williams–like chamber drama that draws its carefully calibrated interactions into a tight knot, creating a *No Exit* level of interpersonal tension. Here "hell is other people" reflects not the arrival of some notorious outlaw galloping in at high noon, but rather the lacerating gibes of one's brother or brother-in-law. In one memorable sequence, Phil mocks Rose's halting attempts to play a piano melody by forcibly accompanying her on the banjo, using his vastly superior skill to humiliate her. Credit Campion with successfully portraying a musical duet that plays like an act of sexual violence.

The roles in this complex of types are superbly acted all around. As Phil, Cumberbatch oozes insolent menace, and can make the act of licking a just-rolled cigarette drip with insinuation. Jesse Plemons's George is the inverse, a stolid, lumbering combination of pity and humility. Peter (Kodi Smit-McPhee) exudes frail vulnerability, yet his latent intelligence and habitual secrecy promise surprises. Dunst's Rose is fretful and weak, afflicted with shuddering abhorrence at Phil and increasingly beating a shamed retreat into alcohol.

Campion exploits these archetypal contrasts via studied juxtapositions. We see George, in his bowtie and bowler hat, driving by in a newfangled automobile as Phil, in chaps and Stetson, skins an animal. Or Peter trying on tennis clothes in a store with his mother—as Phil castrates a bull. Familiar dichotomies of nineteenth-century frontier America are emblemized in the Pete/George/Rose vs. Phil antagonism: on the one hand, beauty, art, cities, gardens, sneakers, manners, femininity, cars, pianos, tennis, the drawing room; and on the other, horses, boots, dirt, knives, rowdy violence, blood, wilderness, erotic power, the saloon.

From this well-trodden mythic path Campion diverges, complicating the calculus by inverting the expected male-female polarities. To our shock, Phil turns out to be highly educated, a Yale Phi Beta Kappa classicist, as well as a noted conversationalist and talented musician. However contemptuous of civilization, he—and not Rose—is its avatar. And so for the second time in a Campion movie we see a piano carted into the wilderness by rough men. In this case, however, it will not be a talented woman who represents the creative civilizing force that can bring music to the savages, but one of those selfsame rough men—indeed, their hero.

That's only the beginning of the surprises Campion has in store. Mutual antipathy notwithstanding, Phil and Pete turn out to share a good deal. Both are naturalists, in their different ways, and both are unsentimental about killing animals—Phil as a hunter, Peter as a medical student who kills rabbits in order to dissect them. Further similarities allow Campion to subvert her film's take on male violence and tenderness. When George makes love to Rose, Phil, hearing their ardor from the next room, flees to the barn and a saddle shrine to Bronco Henry, which he caresses with conspicuous tenderness. Later, repairing to a hidden swimming hole, he slips into dreamy reverie while caressing himself with a gauzy yellow scarf embroidered with the initials "BH."

These sudden reversals and unexpected affinities, and the way they complicate our expectations, make Campion's film interesting to think about (or write about). A film is not a set of ideas, however, but something you watch; first and foremost, it is an experience. And as an experience I find *The Power of the Dog* confusing and, in some respects, disappointing.

Anticlimax and bafflement beset its last forty minutes, as built-up energies leak out through desultory confrontations, and the four protagonists get pushed in confusing directions. For George that direction is offscreen; he mostly disappears. With Phil, the confusion lies in the all-but-instantaneous transformation of his implacable cruelty into tenderness. How is this flip-flop effected? Where does it come from and what does it mean? When Peter catches Phil in his erotic reverie about Bronco Henry, the latter's rage ("Come here, you little bitch!") feels lethal. So when in the next scene he waxes friendly—"Peter, we kind of got off on the wrong foot"— we suspect a trap. And when he subsequently invites Peter out on a trail ride, we wonder, is he going to rape him? Kill him?

The film's denouement includes strange, displaced dramatic cruxes, like George suggesting that Phil get "a washup" before a dinner party, or Rose panicking and being unable to perform at the piano during that party. Do these events merit the centrality Campion gives them? Rose's meandering memories of childhood occupy what seems like excessive space, as does an incident involving animal skins and Native American traders, when she drunkenly stumbles out to offer the hides to the traders, contravening Phil's wishes. Why is Phil so intent on burning the hides in the first place? Why does Rose so desperately want to give them away? And why does Phil dress up in city clothes at the end?

Portentous camera angles and music cue up payoff moments whose meanings prove stubbornly elusive. In the barn, with the soundtrack thumping away at full urgency, Phil rants at Peter about Rose's perfidious gift of the hides. "She's a *drunk*!" he screams, his eyes tearing up with vehemence. In another culminating scene, Phil and Peter share a notably intimate cigarette—to ominous music seemingly piped in from a serial-killer drama. Jonny Greenwood's hectoring score pumps tense foreboding into the movie from the get-go, and by the end I felt pushed around. Drama segues into melodrama, with Peter, Phil, and Rose giving trenchant looks as sinister music plays. But sinister about what? Closeups of a rope Phil is braiding receive more sinister music. Why? Is he going to hang himself with it? Tie Peter up?

Such enigmatic exchanges and textural disjunctions can make the film seem willfully obscure. (Google it, and one of the first prompts you get is "*Power of the Dog* explained.") Writing about *The Piano*, Anthony Lane commented that "the movie flatters viewers by inviting them to read it—to pick up all the signs and symbols and arrange them into an elaborate pattern." I guess I'd like to be a little less flattered by Campion. Confusion is not ambiguity, and a movie where anything seems possible is one where a viewer is reduced to guesswork. *The Power of the Dog* leaves us guessing about way too much. What exactly *is* the power of the dog, by the way? Phil alludes to Bronco Henry's habit of discerning a canine face in the hills, and as metaphor the phrase also surely refers to the theme of male strength and violence. But how? A scriptural quotation jammed into the film's final moments only makes things murkier. Nor does it help that Campion ties up narrative loose ends with a plot twist of the type that has a viewer—this viewer, anyway—shouting "No!"

To be sure, there is plenty of "Yes" to shout about in *The Power of the Dog*. Its dark characterological energies make for a terrific setup; the first hour of this film held me rapt with anticipation. And then there's its opulent, almost humbling beauty, the hallmark of a filmmaker who remains a painter at heart. Such beauty is part and parcel of Campion's metaphysical bent, the steady bead on the ineffable that lends her films their aura of mystery. "There is a light that has to dawn," Isabel Archer muses in *Portrait of a Lady*, trying to articulate her fervent wish to discover life. "I can't explain it, but I know it's there."

A painterly reach for the sublime is the foundational action of *The Power of the Dog*. In trying to understand my response to this intense, majestic, and confounding film, I found myself recalling *In the Cut*, Campion's widely derided 2003 Manhattan serial-killer mystery, a film set in the tradition of such propulsive thrillers as *Basic Instinct* and *Jagged Edge*. In fact, there is little that is propulsive in Campion, and much that is seductive. *In the Cut* is all lurid reds and shadows, with images of turbulent ominous beauty, as when a sudden wind kicks up a storm of leaves outside Meg Ryan's window. Can swirling leaves be ominous? Drenched in malevolence, the movie borders on self-parody; it illustrates how atmosphere can become a form of sentimentality, claiming more than it deserves and leaving a film in an awkward predicament: all dressed up with nowhere to go.

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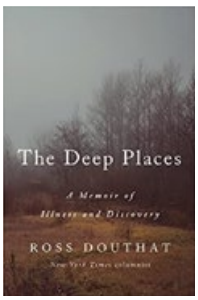
The Evidence of Bugs Unseen

SUSAN MCWILLIAMS BARNDT

Ross Douthat

Ixodes scapularis, the common deer tick, is the size of the head of a pin. A million angels might be able to dance upon it, yet it is likely too small for your eyes to see.

When one of those pinhead-sized creatures bit into his skin, Ross Douthat seemed to have all the protections that this world can offer. He had a loving family, a roomy home, a "dream job." He had connections and influence; as a Harvard graduate who had become the youngest regular opinion columnist in *New York Times* history, Douthat could make himself heard at the highest echelons of power. He had health insurance. He had doctors. On top of all that, Ross Douthat had faith: a serious, considered, engaged faith rooted in Catholic teaching and practice.



THE DEEP PLACES
A Memoir of Illness and Discovery

ROSS DOUTHAT
Convergent Books

$26 | 224 pp.

In confronting mortality and the hardships of human existence, Douthat had, as he told a group of students in 2016, "more to draw on" than many of us do. But Douthat did not recognize that tick on his skin. And then medical authorities refused to recognize his illness.

Douthat ended up with the chronic form of Lyme disease. To those of us who have lived in the mid-Atlantic, pulling ticks off our ankles all summer long, chronic Lyme is a known threat. We all know someone, or know someone who knows someone, who has had it. (My own childhood best friend lost over a year and a half of his early twenties to chronic Lyme.) Chronic Lyme is agonizing, so much so that even reading about Douthat's physical pain—which he marshals all his writerly talents to describe—makes you want to crawl into bed and hide under the covers.

ABIGAIL DOUTHAT

But the CDC, that arbiter of medical legitimacy, does not acknowledge that chronic Lyme disease exists. The CDC website does mention something it calls "Post-Treatment Lyme Disease Syndrome." It basically describes the syndrome this way: some people get treated for Lyme but still feel terrible, months or years later. It is too bad for those people. They are—see the syndrome's name—"post-treatment."

For sufferers of chronic Lyme, this means that most doctors will not help you try to ease or end your pain—though they might suggest (as they have so often suggested to women reporting chronic health problems like endometriosis) psychiatric care.

What does a rational man do, when others dismiss his "eminently reasonable" accounts of hurt and requests for help? What does a man of faith do, when others seem to be losing faith in him? "I went to Mass and prayed for help," writes Douthat. "I googled neurologists. I managed to sleep." Douthat found moments of peace. But he remained in chronic pain, and came to doubt—after multiple, official suggestions that the pain was psychosomatic—his sanity.

Douthat had made a career of words: of saying and writing things that other people took seriously. Sure, people had always disagreed with him. And writers know, more intimately than most of us do, how hard it is to make oneself understood by others. You are always subject to misinterpretation, no matter how clear (in your own mind) your prose. But it is one thing to encounter disagreement or misinterpretation. It is another thing altogether to have your words—your earnest account of what Douthat calls your "enfleshed reality"—denied by the public arbiters of truth. Therein lies a particular form of disorientation and disempowerment, which some people today try to capture with the term "gaslighting."

Reading *The Deep Places*, I kept thinking of the signs that have popped up on front lawns in my neighborhood during the COVID-19 pandemic: "In this house, we believe that science is real." What does that even mean? It's a profession of faith that seems to smugly gloss over some obvious truths: scientific knowledge, like all human knowledge, is partial. Scientists often disagree. Scientists make mistakes. Science may be "real"—it exists; it is one means by which human beings seek to know—but it is always incomplete, and it is sometimes wrong.

It makes me anxious to type that sentence, given the political divisions stoked by the pandemic. (Read: I'm not an anti-vaxxer!) Douthat seems anxious, too, when he reports that going beyond the "medical establishment" was what helped him start to feel better. Key to Douthat's battle with chronic Lyme was the use of something called a Rife machine, which delivers waves of electromagnetic energy at targeted frequencies. The American Medical Association, however, banned Rife machines decades ago, and most doctors regard Rife treatments as quackery.

Douthat knows it sounds strange. But the world, he reminds us, has always been "stranger than official thinking allow[s]." So, Douthat thinks, we must extend the spirit of scientific inquiry beyond the current medical-establishment consensus: given the "strange reality" of chronic Lyme, and in the absence of a clear way to treat it, we should be more open to "strange experiments"—to pursue a diverse range of treatments and to "embrace the experimental spirit that chronic sickness seems to obviously require."

That's the more conventional side of Douthat talking. That's Douthat, the meritocrat, the successful professional who is proud of his Harvard degree and at home in the chattering class. And that Douthat calls us to expand the scientific project, using scientific terms like "experiment," in a way that is edgy but not essentially countercultural. It's the same side of Douthat that claimed the core liberal virtue of "open-mindedness" in a recent *New York Times* column about the Rife machine. This Douthat reassures us that the problem with our scientific, empirical, liberal order is that we are insufficiently scientific, empirical, and liberal.

I get that side of Douthat. I'm a Gen-X meritocrat, too, who cherishes my position of credentialed legitimacy. And those are pretty convincing arguments, at least to modern liberal ears. But the Ross Douthat I really love, the Ross Douthat who shows up in *The Deep Places* in a flurry of beautiful, anguished words, is the Ross Douthat who takes us way beyond polite, professional-class conversation. I love the Ross Douthat who sees God in a sand dollar, who fights zombies in his dreams, who quotes Dante and recites mantras, who thinks of his once-Pentecostal mother speaking in tongues, who communes with saints and ancestors—and who hangs on to each of those things, no matter how fantastical, because he knows they hold him together. He knows that those things are real, too.

Alongside his own inclination to adopt the language and spirit of modern, scientific liberalism, Douthat more profoundly understands that some of the bedrock assumptions of modern science and modern liberalism—that we inhabit bounded, individual bodies in a rationally intelligible world—are incomplete. The small bits of mastery that science gives us over our bodies and our world are far eclipsed by the mystery that is everywhere: around us, between us, inside us. To limit ourselves to modern, scientific, liberal paradigms of knowing is to miss so much of the enchantment, the magic, of life.

The written word itself has a kind of magic to it. Words allow us to see, with our eyes, some evidence of things unseen—whether those things be deer ticks or diseases or angels or suffering or faith—in a world where we too often see too little, and too darkly. Thank God that, through all of this, Douthat kept writing.

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'We Fooled Em'

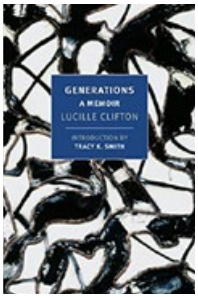
CLIFFORD THOMPSON

A passage in Walt Whitman's seminal 1855 work, *Leaves of Grass*, reads, "And do not call the tortoise unworthy because she is not / something else, / And the mocking bird in the swamp never studied the / gamut, yet trills pretty well to me." Another reads, "For me the man that is proud and feels how it stings to be / slighted, / For me the sweetheart and the old maid…for me / mothers and the mothers of mothers, / For me lips that have smiled, eyes that have shed tears, / For me children and the begetters of children."

Lines from "Song of Myself," the book's longest poem, help separate the chapters of the African-American poet Lucille Clifton's *Generations: A Memoir*. Perhaps, in part, that is because of three qualities of Whitman's work, evident in the lines above: celebration of life, acknowledgment of its difficulties, and recognition of beauty wherever it is found.

Those qualities are present in Clifton's poems. Consider these lines from "song at midnight," in Clifton's 1993 collection *The Book of Light*:

> brothers,
> this big woman
> carries much sweetness
> in the folds of her flesh,
> her hair
> is white with wonderful,
> she is
> rounder than the moon
> and far more faithful,
> brothers,
> who will hold her,
> who will find her beautiful
> if you do not?



GENERATIONS
A Memoir
LUCILLE CLIFTON
NYRB Classics
$14.95 | 89 pp.

And these:

> …come celebrate
> with me that everyday
> something has tried to kill me
> and has failed.

The celebration is frequent, as in the poem "homage to my hips" in her 1980 volume *Two-Headed Woman*, or in "the earth is a living thing," also from *The Book of Light*: "is a black and living thing / is a favorite child / of the universe / feel her rolling her hand / in its kinky hair / feel her brushing it clean."

Those qualities—celebration, acknowledgement, recognition—are also abundantly present in *Generations*, originally published in 1976 and newly reissued by NYRB Classics, with a foreword by the poet and memoirist Tracy K. Smith. Clifton (1936–2010) was the author of more than a dozen volumes of poetry and many children's books, nearly half of them featuring a Black boy named Everett Anderson. In *Generations*, she tells the uniquely Black and quintessentially American story of her family.

The bare bones: Clifton's great-great-grandmother Caroline was born in 1822 in the West African kingdom of Dahomey, in what is now Benin. Caroline and her mother, sister, and brother were captured, enslaved, and taken "on a boat" to New Orleans. Later, in Virginia, Caroline's family was broken up—after the age of eight, she never saw her mother again—and Caroline was sold to a man named Bob Donald. She married Sam Louis Sale (the family name was later changed to Sayle, then Sayles), with whom she had several children, and was trained as a midwife. Following the Civil War, Caroline's daughter Lucy married a white "carpetbagger," Harvey Nichols, whom she later shot to death. Lucy was tried for murder and hanged. Lucy and Harvey's son Gene, a handsome man with a withered arm, died when his son Samuel was six years old; afterward, Caroline, Samuel's great-grandmother, cared for the boy, just as she had taken care of his father.

Then things get more complicated. Samuel, born in 1902, married a woman who bore him a daughter before she died at twenty-one; he then married her friend, who died at forty-four, after giving birth to a son and a daughter (Thelma Lucille Sayles, who became Lucille Clifton). With a third woman, his neighbor, Samuel had yet another daughter. The daughters were all friends, as were their mothers: "Three women who had loved Daddy. Three daughters who had loved Daddy." As a young man Samuel Sayles went north to Depew, New York, arriving on the same train as the father of his second wife, Clifton's mother. In Depew, Clifton's father, grandfather, and uncles worked in the steel mill, before her immediate family moved to Buffalo when she was a small child. Clifton became the first in her family to attend college, studying drama at Howard University, which she left after two years.

To this already dramatic tale, Clifton brings a folksy poetry and an economy that amounts to a magic trick: the book comes

Lucille Clifton

AFRO NEWSPAPER/GADO/CONTRIBUTOR/GETTY

in at eighty-nine pages. The occasion for her remembrance is the drive she took with her husband and brother to attend her father's funeral. One of the pleasures of *Generations* is the way Clifton captures the voice of her father, the source of much, if not most, of the family history. He addresses the author, touchingly, as "Lue," and his words sometimes sing from the page with their rhythms and blues-like repetitions: his great-grandmother Caroline, he told Clifton, "was born among the Dahomey people in 1822, Lue. Among the Dahomey people, and she used to always say 'Get what you want, you from Dahomey women.' And she used to tell us about how they had a whole army of nothing but women back there and how they was the best soldiers in the world." In Clifton's portrait of Samuel, celebration and recognition fuse, recalling a Toni Morrison–like but real-life, homegrown Black inventiveness: "My father had left school in the second or third grade and could barely write more than his name, but he was an avid reader. He loved books. He had changed his name to Sayles (instead of Sayle) after finding a part of a textbook in which the plural was explained. There will be more than one of me, my father thought, and he added the *s* to his name."

Between the chapters are old family pictures, taken in the days when photographs were serious affairs.

Samuel's words are likewise a fusion of acknowledgement and celebration: "We fooled em, Lue, slavery was terrible but we fooled them old people." He adds, in a line quoted twice in *Generations*, "We come out of it better than they did." Here, too, Clifton's fierce economy is at work: Clifton wisely leaves it to the reader to discover her father's meaning. A possible interpretation of "We fooled em" might be that Black people in America did better than anybody thought, not only surviving but creating; and the meaning of "We come out of it better than they did" may be that while Blacks suffered in slavery and its aftermath, they did not, like their oppressors, face the ruin of their souls. This is not the equanimity of the deluded or uninformed; Samuel Sayles had clear memories of an enslaved ancestor. Rather, it is wisdom, hard-won and, for that reason, affirming.

Separating the book's chapters are, in addition to lines from Whitman, old family pictures, taken in the days when photographs were serious affairs and their subjects correspondingly dignified. The eyes of Lucy, Gene, and Samuel gaze at us from the page and from the past, signaling the presence of an unknowable inner reality.

Blues-like: "Well," one of Clifton's chapters begins, the word constituting its own, unpunctuated paragraph. That brings to mind the "Well" half-spoken, half-growled by the seminal bluesman Robert Johnson in "Walking Blues." Johnson's "Well" follows the lines "I woke up this morning / and all I had was gone," and it prefaces what comes next. And so with *Generations*. Some bad things happened, but that's not even half of the story.

CLIFFORD THOMPSON *is the author, most recently, of* What It Is: Race, Family, and One Thinking Black Man's Blues.

Radicalism Without Revolution

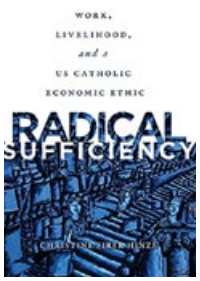
MATT MAZEWSKI

In 1913 and 1914, the now-defunct magazine *Everybody's* hosted a running debate between the economist-priest Msgr. John A. Ryan, a professor of "industrial ethics" at the Catholic University of America and an advisor to the National Catholic Welfare Council (a forerunner of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops), and the labor lawyer Morris Hillquit, a co-founder of the Socialist Party of America. The series was later published in a standalone volume as *Socialism: Promise or Menace?*, with Hillquit arguing for "promise" and Ryan—as an exponent of Catholic social doctrine—for "menace."

But as Fordham theologian Christine Firer Hinze recounts in her latest book, *Radical Sufficiency: Work, Livelihood, and a U.S. Catholic Economic Ethic*, Ryan's contribution in fact "balanced on a razor's edge between ameliorative reform and radical transformation." "After vigorously presenting a Catholic case against socialism," she explains, "Ryan concluded that while church economic teaching does not demand the revolutionary overturn of the market system, from a Catholic perspective, a just economy could entail 'the present system, greatly, even radically amended.'"

One has to imagine Ryan tossing off this comment at least partly tongue-in-cheek. What, after all, is the difference between "overturning" the system and "radically amending" it? As comical as it might sound, though, what Hinze calls the "radical-reformist tension" has been a constant in Catholic social thought since the beginning. And rather than planting a flag squarely on either side of the debate, Hinze follows Ryan in straddling the borderline. Echoing his description of his own economic proposals as "sufficiently radical," she uses his thought as the point of departure for outlining what she terms a "radical sufficiency livelihood agenda." Such an agenda

> presses those struggling for work justice to take into account and responsibly address both the inequities of gender, race, and class, and the looming ecological crisis. Its stipulations for a properly functioning economy are radically inclusive: everyone must be enabled to participate, and everyone must be able to gain access to enough. And while it is dedicated to actionable strategies for incremental reform, it is radical in both its critical analysis of the economic status quo and its recognition of the deep changes—the root-level reorientations—that an inclusive livelihood political economy requires.



RADICAL SUFFICIENCY
Work, Livelihood, and a U.S. Catholic Economic Ethic

CHRISTINE FIRER HINZE
Georgetown University Press
$39.95 | 360 pp.

John Augustine Ryan was born in Vermillion, Minnesota, in 1869 to Irish immigrant parents, and grew up working on the family farm alongside his ten younger siblings (see Arthur S. Meyers's article "Social Justice Warrior: The Legacy of John A. Ryan," *Commonweal*, July 2, 2018). Ryan's lifelong interest in economic ethics was kindled when he read Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* as a teenager, though he admitted to not understanding all of it at the time. He first discovered Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum* while in seminary in 1894, and as Hinze puts it, "was thrilled to find vindicated in nascent papal social teaching his own heartfelt attraction to a priestly

Msgr. John A. Ryan (second from the right) in Washington D.C. with Nina P. Collier (center) and Sidney Cohen (left), date unknown

ALPHA STOCK/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

career dedicated to grappling with social issues and advancing justice."

After being ordained in 1898, he received permission from his bishop to attend graduate school at the Catholic University of America, where he received a doctorate of sacred theology in 1906. His dissertation, later published as a co-authored work with the economist Richard Ely, was titled *A Living Wage* and made both a moral and political case for statutory minimum wages—decades before the enactment of the first federal minimum wage in 1938. In 1916, Ryan became professor of moral theology and industrial ethics at CUA, and served in that position until his retirement in 1939. He also advised President Franklin D. Roosevelt on economic policy during the 1930s and 1940s, and helped shape key elements of the New Deal.

Hinze's objective in *Radical Sufficiency* is to update Ryan's vision of a moral economy for our own day and age, borrowing those principles that have stood the test of time while acknowledging Ryan's limitations, in particular his blind spots around gender and race. Ryan's idea of a "family living wage," for instance, was explicitly conceived of as the amount a male laborer had to earn in order to support a wife and children. He does maintain in *A Living Wage* that women performing the same jobs as men should receive the same compensation—but only because allowing women to be paid less would give employers an incentive to fire men and replace them with women. "Unless we hold that an increase in the proportion of women workers is desirable," he wrote, "we must admit that the social welfare would be advanced by the payment of uniform wages to both sexes for equally efficient labor." Hardly an applause line for an equal-pay rally!

Hinze also relates the story of a lecture that Ryan gave at Howard University in 1943 on the topic of race, "one of his only recorded speeches on the subject," in which he offered a similar admixture of progressive attitudes and soft bigotry. Accounts of the event report that a number of faculty at the historically Black institution were incensed by Ryan's calls for "patience" on the part of racial minorities experiencing discrimination in the workplace and the rest of society. While he did insist that those targeted by such discrimination should be "vigilant, active, and constant in struggling to remove by all legitimate means the disabilities under which they labor," he also interspersed these sentiments with tone-deaf comments about how "the Negro…should especially love white friends…even when they advocate patience and a realistic approach to interracial conditions and practices." Hinze writes that "Ryan's paternalist—and racially self-serving—words and tone are shamefully disappointing" given his stature as "the country's most distinguished Catholic advocate of labor justice." She bracingly concludes that "'the workingman' Ryan so ardently defended had not only a normative gender but a racial identity: he was white."

Radical Sufficiency's balanced and nuanced appraisal of Ryan's thought is characteristic of Hinze's approach to Catholic social thought more generally, which she sees as an effective resource for countering free-market capitalism and other pathologies of modernity, even as she acknowledges its weaknesses and lacunae. For example, she offers one of the best critiques I've read of the "modern papal social teaching's generally negative understanding of ideology," and its description of "Christian truth and faith as…nonideological."

Contrary to the view espoused by most recent popes, according to which "ideology" is necessarily a "skewed interpretation of reality, often imposed on others by force or manipulation, which undermines the good of persons and communities," Hinze maintains that adopting "[a] broader understanding of ideology as a coherent set of beliefs and values about the social order" will allow us to "dereify modern Catholic social documents and tradition, enabling us to analyze them more critically, and accurately" and to "better articulate and advance [a livelihood] agenda in the face of other, currently dominant ideologies that obstruct or oppose it." This tendency to portray one's beliefs as "nonideological" in order to make them seem more reasonable is all too common in the realm of politics, where so-called centrist politicians in particular always work to contrast themselves with the "ideologues" of the left and right. But as Hinze rightly points out, any "coherent set of beliefs" (a designation that, come to think of it, may or may not include centrism) is in fact an ideology, and there is no reason to shy away from acknowledging that. Understanding Catholic social teaching as a kind of ideology will enable more substantive and effective critiques of "other, currently dominant ideologies."

For instance, Hinze pans "forms of popular feminism typified in Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg's widely read book *Lean In*" that celebrate wage-earning as "a hallmark of women's liberation" while neglecting how "[t]he benefits of the two-earner family ideal disproportionately accrued to middle- and upper-middle-class women with spouses or partners who could afford to outsource household work." She draws on the work of the political theorist Nancy Fraser, who has keenly observed how the "feminization of the workforce," despite its undeniable benefits, has been used to "ramp up [the] assault on the working class," and how Sandberg-esque thinking ultimately helps prop up exploitative market arrangements. She praises Fraser's "universal caregiver model," which proposes an alternative to both a gendered "breadwinner-homemaker model" and the "universal wage earner model that marketizes or shortchanges the household economy."

Because of its scholarly style, *Radical Sufficiency* may be better suited to college or graduate seminars than to a popular readership. Indeed, it strikes me as an ideal introductory text to economics and Catholic social thought, drawing extensively from the literature of both disciplines. It is, if anything, too comprehensive: it almost certainly could have been somewhat shorter without losing much of importance. A chapter on race features a discussion of ethnic

classifications of Caucasian Europeans in the thirteen colonies, while a chapter on class detours into a meditation on Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the psychology of group belonging before quoting from Alexis de Tocqueville. These sections are interesting and informative in their own right, but they nevertheless come across as tangential to the book's main arguments, and they give the text a meandering feel.

Despite buying into some of the unfortunate prejudices of his day, the "Right Reverend New Dealer" John A. Ryan was undoubtedly an accomplished scholar, activist, and priest who contributed immensely to defending the dignity of labor through his academic work, his political efforts, and his religious ministry. Many of his observations about political economy ring just as true today as they did a century ago. He had no patience for academics and other elites who disdained organized labor or sought to portray unions as obsolete, declaring in *A Living Wage* that "in the matter of Unionism…the untutored mind of the workman has gone more straight to the point than economic intelligence misled by a bad method." If he were alive today, he would unfortunately find that little has changed.

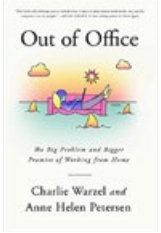
The enduring relevance of Ryan's thought makes him a figure who deserves to be studied much more widely, not only by Catholics but by anyone interested in the history of the American labor movement and the need to revitalize it in the twenty-first century. With *Radical Sufficiency*, Christine Hinze has written an informative and fair-minded introduction to his life and work. Just as important, she has shown how the valuable aspects of his legacy can and should be carried forward by those striving to "greatly, even radically amend the present system."

MATT MAZEWSKI, *a contributing writer at* Commonweal, *is a PhD student in economics at Columbia University and rapporteur of the University Seminar on Catholicism, Culture, and Modernity. You can follow him on Twitter at @mattmazewski.*

BOOKS IN BRIEF

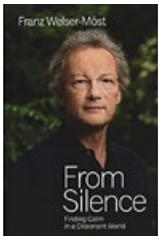
COUNT
VALERIE MARTINEZ
University of Arizona Press
$16.95 | 64 pp.

A girl who stands alone at the shore appears eight times in Valerie Martinez's book-length poem about climate change, *Count*: "During the day, at night / when looking straight on in that highway-drive / hypnotic state." Floods reappear, too, in retellings of indigenous folk tales and in car washes, in the inundations of the climate crisis and in the comfort of splashing in a bathtub as a child. Opposites are drawn together here: the language of legends and contemporary climate science; deserts and tides; reasons to care and the temptations of despair. *Count* is deeply moral, but never moralizing. Reckoning with grief, responsibility, and a deep love of nature, it manages "a delicate balance of beauty— / willows, beaver dams—and warning."



OUT OF OFFICE
The Big Problem and Bigger Promise of Working from Home
CHARLIE WARZEL AND ANNE HELEN PETERSEN
Knopf
$27 | 272 pp.

As Omicron delays yet another round of return-to-office plans, workers are once again left to question what two years of pandemic-induced remote work have meant to them. While the transition to working from home could be challenging (to say nothing of the essential workers who had no choice but to continue working in person), it also allowed some employees to answer the question, "Is there another way to work?" Journalists Charlie Warzel and Anne Helen Petersen's book-length exploration of that question, *Out of Office*, is less a blueprint for how we might rethink our day-to-day work habits (fewer meetings, greater "flexibility") and more an argument for rethinking the nature of work itself: as one part of a good life, rather than the whole purpose.



FROM SILENCE
Finding Calm in a Dissonant World
FRANZ WELSER-MÖST
Clearview
$30 | 184 pp.

"We can trust in silence, where depth and fulfillment become possible and where stillness is true beauty." A statement like that carries a lot of weight when it comes from one of the most distinguished conductors in the world. A student of classical music from childhood and director of the Cleveland Orchestra for the past twenty years, Franz Welser-Möst is versed in the intricacies and complexities of sound. His serenely reasoned case for meditativeness in the face of so much modern noise grows out of a series of "silences" experienced as a youngster—the death of his sister, his own near-fatal car accident—and is deftly backed by thoughtful, informed reflections on performing classical works in contemporary settings, the importance of music in children's education, and the role his Catholic upbringing played in shaping his creative and spiritual sensibilities.

Orthodox Christians before the start of the Eastern and Orthodox Church's Good Friday procession along the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, May 3, 2013

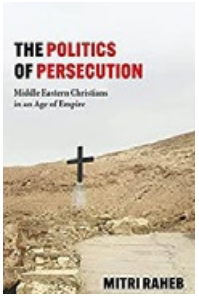
REUTERS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Fear Is a Bad Teacher

DAVID NEUHAUS

In *The Politics of Persecution*, Mitri Raheb, a Lutheran Palestinian pastor from Bethlehem, makes clear the aim of his thought-provoking book: "Evangelical Christians and Western political forces want to frame the story of Middle Eastern Christians as one simply of persecution. This study clearly demonstrates that the story is one of struggle, resistance, social involvement and resilience." This is the writing of a supposed victim—according to the categories too often imposed by outside observers—who rejects the category of victimhood, insisting that he and his community are resilient actors in the events that unfold in the Middle East today. Raheb is not only a pastor but also the founder of the Diyar Consortium, a group of ecumenically oriented educational and social institutions serving the Bethlehem area. He was elected in 2018 to the Palestinian National Council, which serves as a kind of parliament that represents all Palestinians inside and outside Palestine.

Raheb gives an insider's perspective on Middle Eastern Christians that provides historical context, contemporary analysis, and critical reflection standing in sharp contrast to much of the discourse on Middle Eastern Christians heard in the West. Raheb uncovers the genealogy of much of that discourse, which describes Christians as victims and Muslims as persecutors. As Raheb shows, this way of speaking developed in the wake of the European intervention in the countries of the Ottoman Empire and is intimately tied to European involvement in the region. Raheb convincingly demonstrates how European powers used discourse about Christian persecution to further their own interests, a prefiguring of the discourse and practice of right-wing politicians in the United States in our own time.



THE POLITICS OF PERSECUTION
Middle Eastern Christians in an Age of Empire

MITRI RAHEB
Baylor University Press
$24.99 | 215 pp.

At the outset, Raheb points out that "Middle Eastern Christians have often been orientalized, victimized and minoritized." He seeks to move the focus from persecution to the resilience, resistance, and creativity of Christian communities, which are committed both to their heritage and their homeland. European powers, and later the United States, have presented themselves as protectors of the minorities in the Middle East, which justified their interference in the affairs of the region. Raheb admits that at least some Middle Eastern Christians, including ecclesiastical leaders, welcomed this interference and the privileges it brought them. But his narrative reveals that their enthusiastic embrace of Western involvement was shortsighted.

Raheb shows that the Europeans brought not only modernization, education, and a renaissance of Arabic culture—indeed a blessing for the region—but also Zionism, European-style nationalism, and colonialism, planting the seeds of the ongoing conflicts that have torn the region apart in recent decades. Christian mission schools, set up by various Western Christian denominations throughout the Middle East, educated but also alienated as they instilled an allegiance to the culture and patria of the missionaries, further igniting sectarianism and thus weakening social cohesion. Until the nineteenth century, Islam had "provided the backbone, the glue" that kept the multicultural, pluri-religious Ottoman Empire together. Although non-Muslims did not have equality, they functioned within a flexible and pragmatic administrative structure which provided a large degree of stability and continuity as well as opportunities for prosperity. With the arrival of the European diplomats, merchants, and missionaries, this system was increasingly strained. The European powers imposed themselves as spokespeople for the various minorities, promoting their rights and offering them protection. The prosperity and privileges of these protégés provoked fears among Muslims and their traditional leaders that their lands were being transformed without their control or consent.

The resulting fragmentation weakened Middle Eastern society. The new order emphasized denominational distinctions between Christian communities in the region (Latins and Protestants), which furthered Christian disunity. But, even more important, it further separated Muslims, Christians, Jews, and other religious sects. Raheb attributes great significance to the 1860 massacres of Christians by Druze in Mount Lebanon, a watershed in the history of intercommunal relations. In the reports diffused in the West by a British diplomat, the Orient was depicted as barbaric: "Islamic, irrational, anti-Christian, and stuck in a primitive mindset." These massacres seemed to prove that Christians in the region needed special protection, and proffering that protection became a way for the European powers to impose their influence on the region.

The author valiantly attempts to summarize the complex history of how European involvement in the Middle East affected Christians there. He covers the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I, the carving up of the region by the French and the British, the promotion of the Zionist movement by the British, and the mass migrations of European Jews to Palestine. In this period, Christians and Muslims underlined their shared Arab identity to promote identification with developing Arab nationalism. In the aftermath of World War II, the establishment of the state of Israel led to further destabilization, and the Arab regimes fell one after another; the question of Palestine's status has festered ever since. Arab nationalism produced regimes that were overwhelmingly totalitarian, and many chose to make their homes elsewhere, leading to the mass emigration of Jews and Christians. These regimes often presented themselves as protectors of "minorities," a position they used to legitimize their rule and to excuse brutality toward opposition, especially from Islamic movements that challenged them.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the riches raked in from vast oil wealth were ultimately squandered in the wars that have plagued the region. The Middle East was torn asunder in the fighting between Sunni and Shia Muslims, and in the violence resulting from U.S. involvement in the region, almost always done in close collaboration with the Israeli government. Raheb points out that these petrodollars "were used to destroy three ancient civilizations and to displace millions of ordinary people, including nearly two million Christians." Furthermore, he argues that Christians were not the prime target of supposed Muslim aggression and persecution, but rather the casualties of violence that pitted Muslims against Muslims, often manipulated by forces outside the region: "In the past three decades, Middle Eastern Christians were not active players or the direct targets of oppression, but they paid collateral damage for an intra-Muslim sectarian divide, conflicts over oil, and a hawkish U.S. neoconservative policy."

Raheb has produced an important document that should be read in the West by all who want to understand Middle Eastern Christians today. The attempt to reduce Christians to the persecuted who need protection says more about the West and its political ambitions in the Middle East than about Middle Eastern Christians themselves:

> The concept of persecution has been a tool of public diplomacy and international politics. The pattern throughout is clear: Christians of the Middle East are victims of Islamic persecution. This discourse is part of an orientalist perception that persists in framing the Middle East as a backward, barbaric and intolerant region with long-standing sectarian conflicts: between Christians and Muslims, between Arabs and Jews, and between Sunni and Shia. The fact that the Middle East has, for more than nineteen centuries, been one of the most diverse regions in the world—religiously. ethnically and culturally—is ignored.... All these religious sects and ethnicities were able to coexist, not without challenges, but it was possible for the past fourteen hundred years within the framework of Islam. In most cases, albeit

Mitri Raheb

COURTESY OF MITRI RAHEB

> with a few exceptions, Middle Eastern Islam proved tolerant towards Christians even if it stopped short of granting them full equality.

Raheb's book is one in a long series of attempts by educated and activist Christians to influence the discourse about their communities in the Middle East. There is a profound sense of frustration that Western policy makers (and the journalists they rely on) are not listening. Headlines scream that "Middle Eastern Christians are disappearing" or "Christians are being driven out," and wonder about the future of "the cradle of Christianity without Christians." Those working constantly, courageously, and insistently to make sure that Christian communities in the Middle East remain vibrant oases of life, faith, and hope resist this gloom-and-doom discourse. This frustration is a resounding chord throughout this book. Instead of reflecting on the surprising vibrancy of Christian life in the Middle East or the resilience and creativity of these communities in the face of difficulties, too many Western political commentators seem to prefer a discourse that is stark and apocalyptic, ready to bury the Christian presence here and now. Raheb does not deny that challenges and threats exist, but he recognizes that a discourse of despair and resignation risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In "Pray for Peace in Jerusalem," his pastoral letter to the Christian faithful in the Holy Land, Emeritus Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Michel Sabbah wrote, "Your first duty is to be equal to the situation. However complicated or difficult it is, you should try to understand it. Take all the facts into account. Consider them objectively, calmly but courageously, and resist any temptation to fear and despair." Any discussion of the situation of Christians in the Middle East must take seriously the fear that has gripped many Christians in the light of the events of recent decades. However, fear is a bad teacher. A first consequence of fear is the tendency toward isolation, withdrawal, and migration. Today, Christians often isolate themselves in their own neighborhoods, institutions, and clubs, and aspire to migrate. Overcoming fear takes Christians out of their self-imposed ghettos to encounter all those within their society who are similarly threatened by the monolithic totalitarian, religious, or ethnocentric visions that threaten the very composition of Middle Eastern society.

One particularly vibrant response to the reality of the Middle East today are the hundreds of Christian schools, universities, hospitals, orphanages, homes for the elderly and the handicapped, and other institutions spread across the region that offer social and educational services. They are characterized by their devoted service to the societies in which they were established and by their openness to one and all. These institutions reveal the face of a Christian presence that seeks to serve not only Christians but the society at large. They represent a very important Christian outreach beyond the hold of fear and isolation. It is through these institutions that Christians can and do leave their mark on society.

Christian institutions at the service of the entire population go hand in hand with the development of an appropriate Christian discourse about the world in which Christians live. Raheb's book is an excellent contribution to this. It is this discourse that must also distinguish the Christian as a voice for justice, peace, pardon, reconciliation, and selfless love. Fear often provokes the development of a discourse that is reactive and insular, closing Christians off from their neighbors. Those who stay in their ancestral homelands are not the only ones who inspire others by their courage, determination, and faith. There are also those who, like Mitri Raheb, contribute to a conversation that recognizes and strengthens the Christian vocation to be a leaven in society. Their voices need to be heard.

DAVID NEUHAUS, SJ, *is the superior of the Jesuit community in the Holy Land.*

Neither Artificial Nor Intelligent

JOHN SLATTERY

The study of technological ethics can be divided into two distinct parts: the ethics of applied technology and the study of technology and society. Over the past twenty-five years, the vast majority of writing on technology has involved the former: ethical reflections on new possibilities from the latest technology. For example, now that a computer can do X, what are the ethical implications of X? Self-driving cars, general-application robots, medical robotics, smartphones, smart bombs, drones, social media, disinformation, and personal artificial-intelligence applications (Siri, Alexa, etc.) fall into this category.

The latter category, studies of society and technology, covers a host of issues related to the production, development, and implementation of new technologies. This field includes topics such as disparities in digital access; the ecological effects of data mining; diversity, equity, and inclusion among employees at tech companies; and racial, gender, and other biases built into technology (for example, Google understands men's voices better and facial-recognition technology sees white faces better).

Many excellent studies have already appeared in this second category, such as Ruha Benjamin's *Race After Technology*, Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression*, Caroline Criado Perez's *Invisible Women*, the Netflix documentary *Coded Bias*, and Cathy O'Neil's *Weapons of Math Destruction*. These studies are largely aimed at a lay audience on the theory that public awareness—and public actions—may be the only effective way to change common practices of the tech giants. *Coded Bias* is a great example of this work, chronicling Joy Buolamwini's journey from discovering racial bias in facial recognition as a researcher at MIT Media Lab to testifying in a congressional hearing with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

An aerial view of the Soquimich lithium mine on the Atacama salt flat, the largest lithium deposit currently in production

REUTERS/IVAN ALVARADO

ATLAS OF AI
Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence

KATE CRAWFORD
Yale University Press
$28 | 336 pp.

Kate Crawford's *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence* joins this group of essential research for anyone interested in ethical problems in the development and implementation of new technology. But the book stands out in its privileging of the physical over the technological. It is more a book about people, places, and things than about ones and zeros, intended to make us struggle with the assumption that there are technological solutions to all of life's problems. Refreshingly, Crawford is no Luddite. She does not ask us to delete our Facebook accounts or stop using Google, as she understands the vast power imbalances between the tech giants and the individual. The book, instead, is a magnifying glass on abuses and possible abuses, a lens that changes the focus from the latest Tesla or iPhone and toward the hands that carved the earth for the nickel and the now-empty lithium mines that are just as nonrenewable as coal.

While computers can now beat anyone at chess, drive cars, and pilot spaceships, they are still machines, not sentient intelligences.

Crawford divides the book into surveys on the major issues we face in technology today: the environmental impact of technology, the labor practices of Amazon (and others), the problems of massive data collection, the inherently biased nature of facial recognition, the false promises of affective (emotion-based) AI, and the problems caused by the utilization of AI by local and national governments. This litany of alarm bells warns us about the ways the tech community, under the guise of constructing the latest and greatest tech, systemically devalues human life and the health of the earth.

Crawford writes that she uses the term AI (instead of the industry term "machine learning") not because she believes in the forthcoming development of a superintelligent sentient piece of technology, but because despite all evidence to the contrary, the public imagination is firmly enamored by the possibilities of an all-knowing AGI—an artificial general intelligence. This construct has provoked, frightened, and enticed us ever since digital technology was developed in the mid-twentieth century. Innumerable examples exist, from *Avengers: Age of Ultron* to *2001: A Space Odyssey* to *Westworld* and the more recent *Raised by Wolves*. AI in art tends to mimic the world within which it is constructed: while AI in *The Matrix* revealed the dark side of the capitalistic growth of the late 1990s, Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* showcased the opposite with the character Data, promoting a personhood of AI as the optimistic outcome of artistic and technological innovation. The cylons in *Battlestar Galactica*, with its themes of espionage and nuclear apocalypse, were originally created at the height of the Cold War. The character of the Director from Netflix's *Travelers,* on the other hand, speaks to our current moment: it is an AI made by a desperate humanity trying to correct the sins of the past, like the climate crisis, unceasing wars, and deadly pandemics.

Portrayals of AI in art vary because artificial intelligence in this form simply does not exist, and no one knows when or if it will ever be born. While computers can now beat anyone at chess, drive cars, and pilot spaceships, they are still machines, not sentient intelligences. AI today, writes Crawford, "is neither artificial nor intelligent." What we call artificial intelligence—apps that decode our voices, find us products on Amazon, give us directions, play our favorite songs, search the internet for keywords, and try to predict the weather—is, in fact, quite physical. "Artificial intelligence is both embodied and material, made from natural resources, fuel, human labor, infrastructures, logistics, histories, and classifications."

As much as the individual chapters are important, they cannot cover every issue. For example, Crawford paints with a wide brush when she discusses racial bias and misogyny, condemning many common practices within the tech community without getting in-depth about either. And the book has some omissions. While Crawford rightly maligns the dehumanizing labor practices of Amazon, she does not mention that these practices are not unique to the tech world.

Nevertheless, Crawford's narrative exploration of ethical issues takes AI from the world of *Star Trek* and makes it thick, human, and visceral. She presents AI not as a marvel of the future, but as a false promise that brings with it all kinds of problems that can be easy to ignore when we see a driverless car. Technological progress has been and will likely continue to be remarkable, but at what cost?

"When AI's rapid expansion is seen as unstoppable," Crawford writes, "it is possible only to patch together legal and technical restraints on systems after the fact: to clean up datasets, strengthen privacy laws, or create ethics boards." But these responses have always been incomplete and partial. A new mindset, a proper eschatology perhaps, is needed. "How can we intervene to address interdependent issues of social, economic, and climate injustice?… Where does technology serve that vision? And are there places where AI should not be used, where it undermines justice?"

Crawford's cries for justice echo Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato si'*. "Science and technology are not neutral," he writes. "From the beginning to the end of a process, various intentions and possibilities are in play and can take on distinct shapes. [We need] to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made, but also to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur."

Atlas of AI is not a book of theology, but I hope it finds its place in a new canon of studies of technology and society that can refocus our minds and hearts toward human loss, ecological disasters, and social awareness in an age of boundless promises of a technological utopia.

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VOW

Drew Calvert

Fanny Howe calls loneliness
a vow never made but kept. Yes.
That makes sense to me, a postulant
without a post. Guardian angels,
sovereign ghosts, music, gin & tonics
keep me company. For sonic bliss
I turn to G. M. Hopkins. The octo
genarians on my block are talkative.
I talk back. I'd like to *read* to them,
but what? Hopkins? Fanny Howe?
No. My own grandmother preferred
puzzles. One was a fresco—*devilish thing*.
We never got to finish. (Oh).
Offer each other a sign is far better, I think,
than *take this bread*; you get to touch
your neighbors at least. Still, I always
take the bread. Does it mean something,
the dream in which I ate the puzzle piece?

DREW CALVERT *is a writer based in Claremont, California.*

The Truth, Finally

ANONYMOUS

"How do you feel about being a mother?" the woman from social services asked, standing with me in between my sons' beds. She had called a few minutes before to say she was coming upstairs to the apartment where I lived, because my son had told someone his dad used to hurt him, which was true—true when we used to live with him, before. She was therefore obligated to come without warning to investigate, to make sure we were all okay. "I love it," I told her, telling the truth, for once.

St. Elizabeth of Portugal is known for a lie that came true. She was married at age seventeen to her adulterous husband, King Denis, who hated, among other things, her willingness to help the poor. One day she was leaving the house, again, to bring bread to the hungry, and he stopped her as she was going out the door. "What do you have in the basket?" he asked. "Roses," she lied. But when he stole the basket away from her to prove she was a liar, he opened it up to find roses. It was a miracle. Jesus turned the bread into roses so that she wouldn't be a liar, this time.

I have often lied about many things. In my family, we used to have a special language for how my husband would do the things he did. We would say he was hurting the youngest again, or I would say stop hurting the youngest, or my older son would say this will never end. But we did not say he is choking the youngest, or he is slamming the youngest onto the bed. I did say, sometimes, stop it. My older son would say stop it, too. Again and again, I would walk over and put the youngest behind my back and get right up in my husband's face and say stop it, daring him to grab me instead. But our language—distorted as

Saint Elizabeth of Portugal healing a sick woman, Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, c. 1799

PRISMA ARCHIVO/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

it was, truthful as it almost was—was never enough. It did not make things stop.

And he would say things too. Stop hurting our family, he would tell the child that he had choked the minute before. You're disgusting, he would say to the other. You're incompetent, he would tell me. Why? There was always something. Somebody had spilled milk. Somebody had knocked something over. Somebody had made too much noise. Somebody (this was me) had spent too much money on the wrong thing. Everything was always a catastrophe. But it was never his fault. It was always ours, and he had the language to prove it.

We would go to church and lie. We would sit there, praying together, and I would not know what to say. The minute before, on the way to church, he had turned around in the car and hit the youngest in the back seat. For what? For being too loud, for being too slow. For crying at the wrong time. In front of other people, he could make it all seem, somehow, pleasantly humorous. He was charming. I remember, once, a priest describing us to someone else in the church as a charming couple. I wondered if he, or they, could tell just how hard we had to lie to make their lies possible too.

I struggled to know what the truth was through all the lies, but I was taught that God loved moral absolutes. You do not lie. You do not steal. You do not commit adultery. You get married and you stay married. You made a promise. That's it. I shuddered before the horror of a God for whom there were no exceptions. Miserable as I was, I figured that misery was the cost of the promise I had made. Every now and then, I would think, maybe love doesn't have to be like this. But I felt like my soul would break in two if I broke myself off from this person who hated me and, worse, hated my children. Such hate was justified, he explained, again and again, because of our inevitable falls from grace—that is, from *his* grace in the strange, small universe he had made for all of us. I don't have to imagine what hell is. I already know.

Why would there be a saint for whom Jesus would make a lie true? Not every time Elizabeth lied, one presumes, did her words become, suddenly, not lies. Just because Jesus changed her bread into roses didn't mean that she didn't actually lie about it first. It just meant that, this one time, miraculously, others didn't catch her in the lie, didn't get to justify all their violence toward her for that supposed abuse of language. It seems to me to be the perfect miracle.

Perhaps that is why a version of the miracle of the roses is told about several saints and their various husbands. Sometimes the husband accuses his wife merely because her charity seems to threaten the extent of their resources, as in the case of St. Elizabeth of Hungary, the great aunt of St. Elizabeth of Portugal. Sometimes violence is at the heart of the story, as in the case of St. Rita of Cascia in Italy, who like me, had two sons. St. Rita did not leave her violent husband, and her sons grew up to learn violence from their father. She prayed for them. She helped her husband repent, but not soon enough, because his violence incited the neighbors he was feuding with to stab him to death. Her sons vowed revenge. She prayed for them. Her prayers led, seemingly, to this: both died of illness, before they could continue the killing. That was the best she could do.

For the longest time I could not see what truth lay beyond the immediacy of my family's suffering. All I knew was that being there, in that family, together, was not for my children's good, although I struggled for years even to see this much. The idea that marriage was always good for children was too strong, too vivid, until it became plain that this one was not. But when I decided that I would try not to lie anymore, I no longer knew exactly how to tell the truth to other people. The lies our family had told, to each other, to the outside world, the lies my husband told my children and me—they all made a dreadful barrier between me and everyone else. How could I start to explain that everything was not fine, though I had told so many people so many times that it was? It would seem like I was a liar to myself, again. Rationally, though I knew very well that human moral choices, at least, are a matter of situation, I thought that religion was different, and that marriage was about religion. I couldn't quiet the thought that God hated you even when you had a good reason to depart from the absolute of moral consistency. Then I remembered the roses.

When St. Elizabeth of Hungary, St. Elizabeth of Portugal, and St. Rita were standing there with their bread, they did not pray. Instead, they lied, without asking for anything different. Jesus took that moment and made their lies into truth to save them. And they were saved, not in the moment of their exemplary piety, but in their venial sin. Jesus did not blame them for their sin *in this instance*; instead he took their sin and turned it into grace. This seems to me to be the perfect miracle. Maybe God was more than I thought he was. Maybe he could save me too. Would he grant forgiveness for my former lies, and make a path toward a better truth? Was his grace different from the false fidelity to his fabricated world that my husband demanded?

I got a new job, which brought more space to think and see what was happening. After about a year, I started to be able to string the events of my life together, piece together my memories by carefully writing them out. When the pandemic hit, a few months later, I found a desperate way to take heart of grace. I said to my husband, you have to leave. He did not want to. But he did. And it was a miracle. I still thought I might die, that he might come back to kill us, that he would find a way to turn his anger back on us again. But it was worth a shot. It was the best I could do. And, for the moment, it worked.

When later on, much later on, my child, still holding on to the memory of violence, confessed to a counselor that he'd been hurt, he was telling the truth. He had not been able to say this before. When social services came, they wanted to hear the truth from me too. When they asked me, how do you feel about being a mother, I could say, I love it, because I was no longer in despair. This is what I love. Not that former husband, who did those things, who wanted me to save his face at any cost, to lie; but these children, and also myself, and also God, and the saints. And finally, I was telling the truth.

WIND CHILL

I was finishing my time in Mobridge, South Dakota, photographing a recently shuttered nursing home. I'd spent time with families sharing stories about how difficult it was to travel far to see loved ones. The weather enveloping the Midwest was showing just how difficult it could be. The 2019 polar vortex brought temperatures I hadn't experienced many times in my life. At the time I took this photograph, the outside temperature was hovering around 30 degrees below zero, with a bitter, biting wind chill of nearly 60 below.

To step outside my safe, warm car for just a minute or two each time I wanted to take a picture sucked all the air out of my lungs. It was exhilarating and terrifying. I was alone, on a road where I didn't see anyone for about four hours. I kept my car keys in my pocket so that I wouldn't risk locking myself out. It remains one of my most memorable days of taking pictures, enduring the wind and cold to record the historic weather event. The sun setting on the horizon was one of the last frames I made.

KRISTINA BARKER *is a West Coast–based photographer who documents the environment and rural communities. She lived and worked in the Black Hills of South Dakota for more than a decade. Her photos have been featured in the* New York Times, *the* Atlantic, *the* Washington Post, *and many other publications.*

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STANDING BY THE SHUTTERS

W. S. Di Piero

Still nobody at the door.
Junk mail and spam.
Robocalls from the Orient.

I'll deep fry a turkey
and eat it all myself,
share nothing with nobody.

My Lares and Penates protect me:
the wall heater cranks and huffs,
the windows knock their frames,

the wind slaps and whistles me
back to the voices in my blood,
the disappeared, the stopped music

of the lost in the buckling force
that wheezes into the room.
The wind's a skilled ventriloquist,

its moans of dead mother, father,
long gone friends, the-soon-to-be,
inquiring into cupboards and drawers.

Are they asking for me? They say
dumb things: "The ink fell from above."
"I prefer Chapstick to food."

They can't go home. They live nowhere
but here. I'd lock them in, if I could,
and tell them this: Don't stop talking.

W. S. DI PIERO *'s recent books are a volume of poems,* The Complaints, *and* Fat: New and Uncollected Prose.

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