Religion, Politics, Culture

Commonweal

FEBRUARY 2023

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HANK CENTER

SPRING LECTURE SERIES

The Hank Center is pleased to present four important lectures this spring. Each of these events is a hybrid gathering-- both in person (on Loyola University Chicago's Lake Shore Campus), and on ZOOM. The lectures are free and open to the public, but **Registration is Required for Zoom attendees.**

THURS. FEB. 9
UKRAINE CRISIS

DIANA HAIDEMAK
JESUIT REFUGEE SERVICES

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 4PM Central
Welcome and Protect: Jesuit Refugee Services' Response to the Ukraine Crisis

Diana Haidemak, a legal counselor for JRS Romania, will discuss work that JRS is leading in response to the Ukraine crisis– which includes monitoring activity and incidents at the border regarding migrants and asylum seekers, and leading ongoing efforts in anti-trafficking. Diana will be accompanied by Olena Zinkevych, a Ukrainian who coordinates JRS Romania's Ukraine response.

TUES. MARCH 14
ANNUAL ST. JOHN HENRY NEWMAN LECTURE

DR. DAWN EDEN GOLDSTEIN

TUESDAY, MARCH 14, 7PM Central
"You cannot do this without God's Grace": Newman, Dowling, and Conversion as Daily Practice

In the conversionary spirit and legacy of St. John Henry Newman, the Hank Center invites scholars each spring to recount their own discovery (or rediscovery) of the Catholic intellectual heritage. Dr. Goldstein will integrate aspects of her own experience with her research for *Fr. Ed: The Story of Bill W.'s Spiritual Sponsor*—her recently released biography of Fr. Ed Dowling, S.J.

WED. MARCH 22
INAUGURAL JESUIT LECTURE

FR. BILL MCCORMICK, S.J.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 22, 7PM Central
The Christian Structure of Politics: On the De Regno of Thomas Aquinas

The Hank Center inaugurates the Annual Jesuit Lecture--which features Jesuits working in the intellectual apostolate--with Bill McCormick, S.J. The series begins with a classic and most relevant text, *De Regno*, where Aquinas both tempers expectations for the best government and offers a spiritual diagnosis of tyranny, culminating in a sharp critique of civil religion and political theology.

TUES. APRIL 11
ANNUAL CARDINAL BERNARDIN COMMON CAUSE LECTURE

BISHOP JOHN STOWE, O.F.M. CONV.

TUESDAY, APRIL 11, 7PM Central
The Common Good and Synodality: The Vision of Pope Francis

The Cardinal Bernardin Common Cause lecture series provides Catholic prelates a platform to engage people of good will in common cause with the Church on important issues facing us today. The Hank Center welcomes our 2023 Bernardin Lecturer - the Most Rev. John Stowe, O.F.M. Conv., Bishop of Lexington, Kentucky.

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LETTERS

Talking about abuse and abusers; Dorothy Day chooses her own way

LISTENING TO THE CHILD WITHIN

Bernard G. Prusak's article "Who Knew?" (October 2022) is music to my ears and my soul. As a clergy sexual-abuse survivor, one who was horrifically raped by a charismatic priest in 1965 and has spent most of my career trying to educate others about the prevalence of sexual abuse and the silencing and shaming of victims, I am relieved. Mr. Prusak captures what I have experienced over and over and over again: the minimization of our stories and the inability to listen to the whole truth of grooming, deception, mind-tripping language, physical harm, and penetration, while being left to carry the "sins of the Fathers" alone. Can we begin as a community of believers to listen to the child within the adults who have been sexually abused? To really listen, and then create an inclusive and validating response instead of taking another dismissive or blaming action? Children try their best in their own awkward way to speak up, and adults may or may not listen. Can we as a Church listen to the cries within our communities and dare to create the change that is needed for real reform and healing? I hope so.

Patricia Gallagher Marchant
Milwaukee, Wis.

A COMPASSIONATE VOICE

I would like to thank Adam A. J. DeVille for writing his article "Who Can We Forgive?" (October 2022) and *Commonweal* for publishing it.

I have a brother who is currently in prison for sexual crimes against children. His most recent offense is his second. The first offense occurred when he was approximately twenty-one, the second when he was approximately fifty. The first time he received counseling and probation, and the second time he was sentenced to fourteen years in prison, of which he has served seven.

My family was devoutly Catholic. My brother was adopted when he was a baby from Catholic Charities. He had problems from infancy and was unable to do well in school. He currently reads and writes at about a third or fourth grade level. I have come to believe that he probably had fetal alcohol syndrome, and suffers from all that diagnosis entails. Impulse control has always been a problem in most areas of his life.

My family (parents, sister, and I) have suffered in many ways related to my brother's life. Needless to say, I don't usually talk about my brother or his situation. I cannot count the number of times I have heard people say incredibly terrible things about what they think child sex offenders should suffer.

This article is probably the first time I have heard any kind of compassion or attempt to explain the pathology behind this problem. I do not think my brother chose his life. I don't think he has the capacity to live any other life. Only God knows the answers, and She has not offered them to me, despite years of prayer.

Annmarie B. Brennan
Palm Coast, Fla.

THE MOST LIBERATED PERSON IN THE ROOM

Thank you for reprinting a December 1970 article by Doris Grumbach ("Father Church and the Motherhood of God," January), taking note of her recent death (at 104) and her many contributions to *Commonweal*. Her evident gifts of insight and expression are enduring.

One reader of the original article on the Graymoor conference on feminism, however, did not feel Grumbach had adequately reported the remarks of some at the conference. While Grumbach had written admiringly of the last speaker, Dorothy Day, she commented

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LETTERS

that Day "said nothing about women's liberation, never mentioned the words, never stated her views on the subjects of economic equality, careers, chores, society's institutions." Grumbach contrasted this to Betty Friedan's speech the day before, in which Freidan had addressed those issues.

In the June 1971 issue of *The Catholic Worker*, Day responded to Grumbach's criticism, writing that the "report of my speech in the *Commonweal* was that I did not mention Women's Liberation but reminisced about my life and travels." Day countered that, in fact, she had taken up three points of Mrs. Friedan's talk. First, that women "did not need to be involved in children for more than fifteen years of their lives," to which Day responded that she felt very much involved in the lives of her nine grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. Second, that technological advances had "freed women from drudgery and gave them more time for public life," to which Day counterposed her experience of living with the poor and her recent visit to India. As far as Day was concerned, the real struggle "was still a class struggle, and the big issue today was world poverty." Finally, Friedan's view of competing gender roles was countered by Day's observation that "Around the CW I like to remember those words of St. Paul, '...neither male nor female.' Certainly we see plenty of men at the sink washing dishes and resetting tables for the lengthening soup line." Day concluded by recommending that "Women's Liberation groups which are Catholic" should "remain loyal to their sisters by finding concordances" with them; but at the same time, they should continue to look to Mary as their model.

Years later, Sally Cunneen—who had also addressed the conference and was referenced by Grumbach—wrote an article for *CrossCurrents* (Fall 1984) touching on the Friedan-Day exchange. Cunneen remembered Day telling the conference that the only "authority at the Worker was the cook"—and that the audience had not known what to make of her story. "Hoping to hear Dorothy's dry, ironic voice," Cunneen wrote, "I replayed the tapes of that conference and found that her story had been removed. Yet it had been the only thing I remembered."

Cunneen reported it was understandable that women at the conference might have found Day's commitment to self-sacrifice and service unappealing. "Yet she had already gone through the struggles so many were facing," Cunneen wrote, had chosen her own way, and long before "had broken away from conformism and consumerism." As Grumbach herself had noted: Day was already the most "liberated person" at the gathering.

Patrick Jordan
Brooklyn, N.Y.

WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?

It's too bad that your January issue's cover art could not show the real magnitude of income inequality. It's not even close. With Elon Musk measuring in at 163 millimeters for $23.5 billion, the delivery person should be .00022 millimeters tall—a fraction of the thickness of a human hair. By my rough estimation, if the delivery person were the size of the dot on the "i" in "Francis," Elon would have to be about two thousand times taller—a little over one thousand feet. The numbers are so bad that words fail me.

Bob Brunette
Madison, Wis.

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

The Debt Standoff

To understand the real priorities of today's Republican Party, one should skip past the campaign rhetoric of last year's midterm elections—all the performative outrage about critical race theory and transgender athletes—and focus instead on the very first thing that Republicans did, and the first thing they *refused* to do, once they took control of Congress in January.

The first piece of legislation the new Republican majority passed would rescind $80 billion in new funding approved last year for the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), money mainly intended to help the agency audit rich tax cheats. The Congressional Budget Office has projected that the new funding will bring in over $180 billion in revenue over the next ten years—which means that the GOP bill repealing it would add $100 billion to the national debt over the same period. Immediately after trying to gut the IRS (they're also introducing a bill to abolish it outright), congressional Republicans signaled their unwillingness raise the federal borrowing limit, or "debt ceiling," unless President Biden agrees to major spending cuts. Together, these two moves demonstrate that, despite all the recent talk about "realignment," the GOP remains what it has been for decades: a party designed to convert the cultural grievances of white working-class voters into low taxes for the wealthy and austerity for the poor.

The hypocrisy is breathtaking. During the Trump administration, Republicans were unconcerned about the mounting federal debt. They voted with Democrats to lift the debt ceiling three times with no demands for spending cuts in return. Indeed, between their Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (expected to add $1.5 trillion to the federal debt over a decade), their bloated defense appropriation bills, and the emergency pandemic relief of 2020, $7 trillion of new federal debt was incurred while Trump was in office. But now that a Democrat is in the White House, the Republicans have suddenly rediscovered their fiscal scruples. For purely ideological reasons, they want to shrink the federal government, especially entitlement programs like Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. For purely partisan reasons, they want to do it while a Democrat is president so that he, and not they, will be blamed by voters for all the pain this causes. In 2011, under the last Democratic president, Republican lawmakers used the debt ceiling as leverage to secure significant cuts to federal spending. Unless President Obama agreed to their demands, they warned, the U.S. government risked defaulting on its financial obligations to creditors, with possibly catastrophic consequences for the global economy. This was extortion, plain and simple; and it seemed to work.

Members of the GOP's "Freedom Caucus" are now hoping it works again. As part of the shady deals Kevin McCarthy cut to be elected Speaker of the House, he reportedly promised to let the Freedom Caucus replay the Republicans' 2011 stunt. He is now asking the White House to negotiate with his party's fiscal terrorists. So far, the Biden administration has quite properly declined the invitation: it wants a "clean" vote on raising the debt ceiling, with no strings attached. The administration points out that the federal government has an obligation to make up the difference between the spending Congress has already authorized and the taxes it has approved. That means borrowing more money. If Republicans on Capitol Hill want to borrow less, then when it comes time to pass the next budget, they should vote to cut spending, increase taxes, or both. What they mustn't do is hold the U.S. government's "full faith and credit" ransom in order to force massive spending cuts for which there is little support either in Congress or in the country at large. It turns out that, whatever they think about vaccine mandates or gender-neutral pronouns, voters of both parties like their Social Security.

It is unlikely but not impossible that the Freedom Caucus will take their stunt all the way to the end. In case they do, Biden needs a contingency plan. Some have argued that the Fourteenth Amendment, which states that "the validity of the public debt of the United States…shall not be questioned," gives a president all the power he needs to raise the debt ceiling unilaterally. Others have suggested using an obscure parliamentary procedure called a "discharge petition" to force McCarthy to hold a floor vote on raising the debt ceiling, which would allow the sane members of both parties to combine forces. Still others say the president could simply instruct the Treasury Department to mint a platinum coin worth $1 trillion and deposit this with the Federal Reserve—abracadabra, problem solved. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen once called this idea a "gimmick," and no doubt it is. But if push comes to shove, the only important question is: Would this gimmick *work*? Many experts say it would.

Whatever strategy Biden resorts to, the important thing is that he not allow the GOP's dead-enders to blackmail him into rolling back a century's worth of hard-won progress for the elderly, the poor, and the sick. If the Republicans believe they can win back the White House and a majority in both houses of Congress by promising to starve or eliminate the country's most popular entitlement programs, they're welcome to try. Even if they don't win (and they won't), they would at least have the moral satisfaction of knowing they had fought for what matters to them most—not the woke re-labeling of Mr. Potato Head or even the "invasion" at the border, but the preservation of private wealth.

Another Nigerian Martyr

In the early morning hours of Sunday, January 15, a group of armed bandits forced their way into the parish rectory of SS. Peter and Paul Parish in the northern Nigerian village of Kafin Koro. Amid shouts of "Allahu Akbar," the gunmen gained access to the sleeping quarters of two priests, Fr. Collins Omeh and Fr. Isaac Achi, who prayed and heard each other's confessions as they were taken hostage. Omeh was shot in the shoulder but managed to flee. Achi was shot in the chest and left to bleed to death as the terrorists—later claimed by the Islamist group Boko Haram—set fire to the premises and escaped.

This is not the first time such an attack has taken place in Nigeria, which has seen a rising tide of violence for several years. Much of it has been directed against Christians, who account for roughly 45 percent of Nigeria's total population of 200 million, and, in particular, the country's large Catholic minority (10 percent). Forty people were shot and killed during Mass at a parish in Ocho Diocese last June. During the five previous months, six other Catholic priests were kidnapped and killed across the country. Noting that nearly six thousand Christians were killed for their faith in 2021, the watchdog group Open Doors USA has declared Nigeria the seventh most dangerous place for Christians in the world. Experts warn that insecurity across the country is only likely to intensify in the run-up to the February 25 elections.

The reasons for the violence in Nigeria—Africa's largest democracy—are varied and complex, and no region of the country is exempt. Many of the attacks on civilians (both Christians and Muslims) can be traced to growing struggles over agricultural resources; aridification due to climate change has intensified the longstanding herder-farmer crisis in north-central Nigeria. Cult and ritual violence has spiked in the southwest, while piracy and oil theft continue near the Niger Delta. Extreme poverty has made kidnapping for ransom routine throughout the country.

American conservatives have accused the Biden administration of "ignoring religious persecution" in Nigeria. Late last year, a group of Republican senators, including Josh Hawley of Missouri and Marco Rubio of Florida, released a statement urging Secretary of State Antony Blinken to once again designate Nigeria a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC). Under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, a CPC designation paves the way for sanctions against countries found to be "engaged in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom." But it's difficult to see what such a measure would accomplish in Nigeria: if anything, U.S. sanctions would only further weaken the ability of the government to protect innocent Nigerians—of *all* faiths.

A more effective response is the nuanced one offered by Pope Francis in anticipation of his historic trip to Congo and South Sudan in February. Following Achi's death, the pope decried violence against Christians and invited the world to join him in prayer—demonstrating compassion and solidarity with victims of religious persecution while preserving his commitment to dialogue with the Islamic world. In an interview, Francis condemned not the absence of religious freedom in Africa, but the predatory attitude of developed countries, which he accused of having a "collective unconscious that says Africa is to be exploited." Fr. Achi's martyrdom should not be used to stoke more fear and hostility toward Islam. Let it inspire the kind of humility, courage, and superhuman patience that true peacemaking requires—and that lies at the heart of the Gospel.

—Griffin Oleynick

The Right to Repair

Electronic waste is the fastest-growing refuse stream in the United States. It's expected that by 2030, the world will be generating 74 million tons of e-waste a year, including billions of discarded smartphones. Almost every home has a desk drawer or box in the closet filled with outdated chargers, cameras, and phones that ideally would be recycled but more likely will find their way to a landfill—there to leak toxic materials into the soil and aquifers.

New York's Digital Fair Repair Act, signed into law by Gov. Kathy Hochul in December 2022, won't eliminate e-waste. It won't counter the cultural obsession with new technological toys (American families spend nearly $1,500 per year on electronics). It isn't universal, since it excepts large appliances like refrigerators, medical devices, and agricultural equipment. But it is a step in the right direction, an acknowledgment of how financially and environmentally unsustainable it is to constantly replace electronics. And it is the biggest step any state has taken thus far, though several other states are considering similar legislation.

What the law *will* do is guarantee that consumers and independent repair shops have the same access to diagnostics, parts, and repair instructions that manufacturers provide to their own technicians. Taking effect on July 1, the law addresses some of the concerns long raised by the right-to-repair movement: that repair restrictions set by manufacturers prevent timely fixes (primarily by limiting access to providers), increase consumer prices for repairs, harm the environment, and threaten small businesses. In their defense, manufacturers often cite concerns over unsafe third-party repairs and the right to protect proprietary information, but a 2021 FTC report found that "there is

scant evidence to support manufacturers' justifications for repair restrictions." Often, these restrictions are simply anticompetitive, which helps explain why the Biden administration is also pushing to increase enforcement or even draft new rules against them. This pressure has already prompted some major companies to take action ahead of new laws. Apple, for example, launched a self-service repair store in 2022 to sell individual parts and repair manuals, though the company is still criticized for its notoriously difficult-to-fix products.

In many cases, it's hard to know just how repairable a product might be until it's bought and paid for. No label on the packaging distinguishes the earbuds with batteries that can be replaced in under an hour for fifteen dollars from those that can't be replaced at all. The U.S. Public Interest Research Group, a consumer advocacy organization, claims that laws like the one in New York could save American families an average of $330 per year as they repair rather than replace their electronics, but consumers could potentially save even more if they could get a sense of a product's repairability when deciding what to buy. To that end, as the right-to-repair movement gains momentum, lawmakers in the United States might consider advocating for "repairability scores" to appear on electronics labels. (France implemented such a measure last year.)

There may be little hope of leveling the mountains of electronic waste; right-to-repair laws, no matter how broad, will not keep manufacturers from designing products that break down in a short period of time. But they'll give consumers a chance to opt out of the relentless cycle of product upgrades, and could also yield some much-needed protection for the environment. It can seem like an old-fashioned value to extend the life of a product when there's always something newer and flashier on the market—but, given the realities of finite resources and ever-higher prices, it might be just what modern consumers need.

—Isabella Simon

The Dangerous Game

Football fans of a certain age may remember Charles White, who died in January at the age of sixty-four from esophageal cancer. White was a Heisman Trophy winner with the University of Southern California and played eight seasons in the NFL. He was in his early fifties when he was diagnosed with dementia, a symptom of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE)—the degenerative brain disease brought on by repeated traumas to the head—which is diagnosable only after death. White's former wife, who was his caregiver, has donated his brain to determine whether he suffered from CTE, which she thinks led to his abusive self-medication after football. "Everyone was targeting him" on the field, she said. "And he gave hits that were as hard as the hits he was getting."

Hard hits are part of the game: bursts of violence celebrated, replayed, and expectantly awaited anew by an audience primed for more. As an inevitable byproduct, so are injuries. The NFL leads major American sports in injuries by a long shot—nearly six per game, according to a Harvard analysis, compared with less than one in the others. These moments aren't celebrated, but they're still often replayed: YouTube is filled with compilations of football's "most gruesome" injuries, some going back decades. One of these occurred on Super Bowl Sunday in 1989 when Cincinnati Bengals lineman Tim Krumrie severely broke his leg in front of a global television audience. One of the most terrifying occurred last month, when Buffalo Bills player Damar Hamlin went into cardiac arrest after tackling an opponent. Reports later detailed the scope of critical-care protocols the NFL has in place in every stadium at every game. These measures thankfully helped save Hamlin's life, but their very existence is an acknowledgement of the potentially fatal risks of America's most popular sport. As the game is played with more speed than ever, and as the competitive spotlight encourages players to take greater chances with their bodies, an on-field tragedy seems only a matter of time.

Most injuries aren't as serious as Hamlin's. The ruptured tendons and torn ligaments, the euphemistic dings and dents—these receive little attention outside locker rooms and fan blogs. Yet the unavoidable hazards of the job exact a disproportionate toll on the vast majority of those not named Tom Brady. As with injuries, football is an outlier with its player contracts, which in other sports tend to be fully guaranteed. A recent article in the *Guardian* notes that the typical NFL contract is filled with so many team-friendly terms and conditions that players rarely receive the full announced value. Most contracts also contain standard clauses that reduce payments for time missed due to injuries in games or practice. Hamlin himself, placed on the injured list after nearly dying, was set to be docked a portion of his salary until the league and players' union worked out a deal to pay him in full.

The NFL has generated $18 billion in revenue this year and is well on track to meet its goal of $25 billion in 2025. Many of the players you see on the field today could be gone by then. The average NFL career is short, usually lasting about three years. That may not be enough time to qualify for the full slate of pension and health-care benefits helpful in treating injury-related issues, including CTE, down the road. But the NFL says it's committed to ensuring the safety of those who make their product so valuable. This year, for the first time ever, the meaningless Pro Bowl exhibition game won't have tackling. According to the NFL website, it will be played in "an exciting new format": flag football.

—Dominic Preziosi

ALEXANDER STERN

Escaping the Algorithms

The question concerning AI

In recent months, artificial intelligence developers have released tools to the general public that have demonstrated the capacity of AI to mimic and perhaps, in some cases, even surpass human creative capacities. The technology, known by the general term "generative AI," is trained on large data sets consisting of examples of images or writing. It can then spit out images conforming to a specific description, pieces of writing in a user-specified genre, or convincing responses to a series of questions.

The results can be quite startling. When I asked DALL-E 2, the image generator, to produce an image of "an FBI agent playing pinball in the style of Paul Klee," it produced something that felt like a Klee to the untrained eye and wouldn't look out of place in an art gallery. I had the uncomfortable experience of kind of liking it. And the text generator ChatGPT (Generative Pre-trained Transformer) produced a plausible, if juvenile, draft of a poem about the risks of AI: "Once we create it, we can't control its mind, / It could turn against us, and be unkind." Others have used AI to write code, play games, and even diagnose maladies.

Predictably, the newly released technologies have generated their share of online excitement, prognostication, and handwringing. Some people are understandably concerned that these technologies will put an already beleaguered class of "creatives" out of work. AI is already enlisted to write financial news or weather reports. With a few human interventions, the current model is already capable of producing coherent, if insipid, op-eds and workmanlike explainers. Some genre fiction writers are even using it to fill in details and generate ideas, by asking how it might continue a story that's hit a wall. And an AI-generated image recently won first prize at a Colorado art fair.

Others see something even more sinister in the technology: the prospect of what's called artificial general intelligence. More advanced versions of this technology, the worry goes, will develop something like a mind of their own and start to go well beyond the prompts fed to them by human users, with unpredictable and possibly dangerous results.

But, as yet, what's striking about the products of GPT and DALL-E 2 is their evident mindlessness. Playing around with GPT, I was reminded of a scene from *American Psycho* where Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale)—a serial-killer finance bro blank behind the eyes who just wants to fit in—monologues platitudes about how to solve world problems: "Most importantly, we have to promote general social concern and less materialism in young people." Like Bateman, GPT is programmed to respond in the most conformist, inoffensive way possible. To the extent that it has a personality or style, it is the perfect average of the styles of the corpus it was trained on, which, judging from the results, seems to have included a fair amount of HR speak and legal boilerplate.

Even when it is asked to write in the style of someone else, GPT's fundamental lack of style shines through. I asked it to "write a tweet in the style of Donald Trump about why up is down" and it produced this: "Up is down, folks! Believe me, I know what I'm talking about. The fake news media doesn't want you to know this, but it's true. Up is down, and down is up. Trust me, it's all part of my plan to make America great again!" Even here, the writing has the quality of blanks being filled with probabilistic precision, a kind of reverse Mad Libs where words are chosen at the opposite of random—with too much, rather than too little, knowledge of the context. The overall result is a translation of Trump into the language of an overcautious, overliteral, overeager teacher's pet.

In his magnum opus *Being and Time*, the philosopher Martin Heidegger wrote about "*das Man*"—*man* being not the German word for "man," but the impersonal pronoun "one" or "they," as in "it's just what one does" or "that's what they say." In Heidegger's analysis of human existence, "the they" represents the average, everyday background mode of collective being that we all depend on to make ourselves understood, to make small talk, to get by. But there is a risk of falling completely into the everyday, getting lost in "the they" and living effectively unfree lives, where people just do "what one does" and their "ownmost possibilities" are never taken up authentically, to say nothing of being realized.

The language of "the they" is what Heidegger calls "idle talk" (*Gerede*). This is language not as it belongs to any individual expressing herself, but the average, everyday sentiment that circulates more or less thoughtlessly—that belongs to everyone and no one. It is the background talk against which genuinely original expression can emerge. "Idle talk" is not a problem in itself—it's part of how language works. Life would be unbearable and exhausting if we had to express ourselves at every chance with fresh insight and constantly come to grips with the utterly original outpourings of others. The average expression and intelligibility of idle talk is a necessary default.

The trouble arises when we engage in nothing but idle talk and confuse it with genuine understanding. Think, for example, of a pedantic art historian who has so thoroughly absorbed the conventional discourse about the style of Paul Klee that he can't really see the paintings anymore. For him, any given Klee

"A Paul Klee–style painting of an FBI agent playing pinball," created by the author with DALL-E 2 an AI system by OpenAI

painting is just grist for encyclopedic chatter about expressionism and Bauhaus. While seeming to give us access to the objects it is apparently about, idle chatter actually closes them off, sealing them away under interpretations that are learned and repeated by "thought leaders" and thought followers. The more it circulates, the further it departs from real objects, and the further it blocks off the possibility of new interpretations. This language, of course, evolves, and there are dissenting views, but "the discourse," as it's sometimes called on Twitter, is all channeled down predictable, almost automated avenues. New variations on the same theme are developed; new mash-ups and remixes proliferate; and new objects are subjected to the near-industrial cycle of interpretation, dissemination, and reaction. But this production is involuted and self-referential: it is driven by motivations and incentives internal to "the discourse" and increasingly disconnected from the outside world.

Social media did not create but has accelerated and refined this process. To the extent that they appear at all, real events appear on Twitter as almost an embarrassment to be quickly covered over by the ready-made interpretations of a given political or cultural framework. What matters is not coming to grips with the world in all its ambiguity and with all its complicated, often contradictory features, but rather fitting the new phenomena into an existing discourse. New events seem to exist only to provide fresh fodder for interpretation that sets upon them like an algorithm on new inputs. The result is language that is more about itself than about the world.

Insofar as it is used for cultural production and commentary, AI will streamline already well-established tendencies toward imitation, repetition, and pastiche.

In this respect, GPT may be not so much a revolutionary leap forward as another step down a long, well-trodden path. Insofar as it is used for cultural production and commentary, it will streamline already well-established tendencies toward imitation, repetition, and pastiche. In *The Player*, Robert Altman's send-up of Hollywood superficiality, there is a running joke about the derivative pitches that the producer Griffin Mill fields from writers: "It's kind of like a *Gods Must Be Crazy* except the coke bottle is an actress…it's *Out of Africa* meets *Pretty Woman*"; "it's kind of a psychic political thriller comedy with a heart…not unlike *Ghost* meets *Manchurian Candidate*." One of the best uses of DALL-E 2 (whose name, a combination of Pixar's *WALL-E* and Salvador Dalí, already evokes a movie sequel) is to produce amusing and sometimes interesting mash-ups of style and content: "a Klimt-style painting of the JFK assassination," "a painting in the style of Roy Lichtenstein of a couple on their smartphones," "a portrait of Super Mario by El Greco." What it's good at, in other words, is what our culture already does: inane recombination that generates novelty out of what already exists.

Of course, that it is unoriginal is no criticism of AI. It seems likely, however, that it will contribute to the proliferation of cultural content designed not to be original or even to say anything, but to produce, like a drug, the same experiences over and over again, to call them up on demand. This is what our culture has already been up to for some time,

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as many commentators—most recently, Ross Douthat in *The Decadent Society*—have noted. The culture repeats itself over and over again, relying on sequels, reboots, and remixes rather than genuine creativity to produce reliably profit-making content that can be delivered with algorithmic precision into people's feeds. GPT may help further mechanize the production side of our culture as much as the delivery side has already been mechanized. The net effect, Douthat argues, is a kind of cultural doom loop—stagnation, where, as Antonio Gramsci put it, "the old is dying and the new cannot be born."

In a later essay, "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger adopted a term to describe what he took to be the essence of modern technology: *Gestell*, which is variously translated as "enframing" or "positionality." He uses the word to refer not to any particular product of technology, but to the way technology overall imposes a particular order and way of being on things—how it "reveals" or "discloses" the things that it comes into contact with. In a famous example, Heidegger counterposes a hydroelectric dam on the Rhine with a much earlier form of technology, a footbridge crossing the river:

> The hydroelectric plant is not built into the Rhine River as was the old wooden bridge that joined bank with bank for hundreds of years. Rather, the river is dammed up into the power plant. What the river is now, namely, a water-power supplier, derives from the essence of the power station.

Whereas the footbridge allows the river to appear as it is, the power plant transforms the nature of the river into a resource. Under the possibility that it will be "set upon" by modern technology, Heidegger writes, the character of things changes: "Everywhere everything is ordered to stand by, to be immediately on hand, indeed to stand there just so that it may be on call for a further ordering." For generative AI, the images and text of human culture, all our efforts to communicate and express ourselves, indeed all searchable human history, may soon lie there on call for a further ordering.

To enframing, Heidegger counterposes the way of revealing unique to poetry, understood broadly as the articulation of things in language. Where modern technology orders things into resources, *poiesis*, in Heidegger's jargon, "lets what presences come forth into appearance." The paradigmatic case of this kind of revealing is the giving of names. Names don't dominate things; they give things particular contours which make them available for further articulation. They allow them to come forth—to emerge from the blurred, undifferentiated background of existence with definite features and in definite relationship to other things, but with a certain incompleteness, ambiguity, and mystery that solicits further, indeed never-ending, attention and interpretation.

For Heidegger, what is to be feared is not technology itself, but rather its mode of disclosing the world. The threat is not mainly that AI may take over certain activities from human beings, but that we already regard these activities as functions akin to the supply of power. "Where enframing reigns," Heidegger writes, "there is danger in the highest sense." Then he quotes the poet Friedrich Hölderlin: "But where danger is, grows / The saving power also." To the extent that the shock of this technology might direct us back toward different ways of seeing, we may yet be saved.

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MOLLIE WILSON O'REILLY

Benedict the Innovator

Farewell to the pope who made us imagine a new way

Pope Benedict really cared about the job he had to do, and in resigning he demonstrated that the responsible use of power sometimes requires a willingness to give it up.

My oldest child was a baby when Pope Benedict XVI stepped down. He's in middle school now, and I'm constantly trying to find a balance between shielding him from the news, which is so often overwhelming and terrible, and making him appropriately aware of world events.

"So, it looks like Pope Benedict is dying," I told him, figuring he'd be hearing about it soon enough. "The pope is dying?" he asked, his interest ever-so-slightly piqued. "Not Pope Francis," I clarified. "Pope Benedict. The old pope." He took this in and went back to talking about basketball. A few hours later I would have the same exchange with his younger brother. "Not Francis, Benedict. The pope emeritus." I tried to give them some idea of how unusual the situation was, to make them aware that "pope emeritus" was not, as they would say, "a thing" until quite recently. I told them how disorienting it was for adult Catholics, and especially those of us working in the "having opinions about the Catholic Church" sector, to learn that Benedict planned to resign. *Can he even do that? What are we supposed to call him now?* Some Catholic pundits had spent the final years of John Paul II's pontificate insisting that the Vicar of Christ, however infirm, could not possibly abandon his post. And now here was his successor, a man who had been expected to follow faithfully in his former boss's footsteps, charting a radically different course. Those who had convinced themselves that no other choice was possible had to reckon with the discovery that, actually, it was. Suddenly, the pope retiring was a thing.

It seems painfully naïve to talk about responsible leadership in a time of empty iconoclasm, when "understanding what a job involves and earnestly trying to do it" is out and "disruption" is in. But Pope Benedict really cared about the job he had to do, and in resigning he demonstrated that the responsible use of power sometimes requires a willingness to give it up. He gave us an example to follow: if you think your continued leadership is likely to do more harm than good, you can and you ought to step aside and let someone else lead.

The novelty of that situation led to a lot of smaller decisions about what Benedict should be called, what he should wear, where he should live, and so on, right up to the final decisions about his funeral rites. Some of the answers to those questions were imprudent. But the struggle to discern a path forward was itself salutary: even in the Catholic Church, tradition isn't the only available answer. Sometimes you have to try something new, see if it seems right, maybe change course if it fails. These are banalities in most places, but in Rome they are radical truths. Staying the course, dying in office, would have meant keeping the Church from having to do something new. But that didn't make it the right choice. Resigning meant trusting that the Church could encounter a new set of circumstances and just…figure it out.

There were intimations, during Benedict's emeritus period, that the former pope was less than delighted with the choices made by his successor. But whatever his preferences might have been, Benedict had greater faith in the guidance of the Holy Spirit than his most fervent admirers (and Francis's most fervent detractors) have ever shown. He trusted that the Church would be all right in someone else's hands. He was open to being surprised, to being, like St. Peter, led in his old age in a direction he might not have chosen. He and I would not have agreed about which were the greatest threats to the Church's integrity and what sort of adjustments would keep the ship afloat. But he had faith in the Church's ability to navigate, not just as an extension of his personal authority, but as a project greater than any of us.

The experience of figuring out what to do with a pope who stops being the pope was an experiment in encountering unexpected questions and searching for new answers. It was awkward. We didn't get it all right. But it was a good warm-up. It turns out the fact that a thing has never been done before doesn't mean it can't be done now. There are many more questions the Church doesn't want to face. Searching for answers, embracing humility, and trying new things will be the only way forward.

None of this reflection was interesting to my kids, who were barely aware that Benedict existed. But it seems to me that they are growing up in a Church that is a bit more flexible and able to confront challenges, thanks to Pope Benedict. And that's a sentence I never thought I'd write.

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JOSEPH SORRENTINO

'The Whole Country is a Grave'

Searching for Mexico's 'desaparecidos'

They're called *los desaparecidos*: the disappeared. People who left home one day and never returned. There are slightly more than a hundred thousand of them in Mexico and close to two thousand just in the state of Puebla. They may have been taken by gangs, cartels, or by the Mexican police. No one is sure why a person disappears, only that he or she is gone.

The criminals "do not ask for money or anything," said Marcelo Salvador Salinas Cubillos, whose wife and brother-in-law disappeared three years ago. "It is not like a kidnapping. Maybe they say to someone 'Sell drugs' and they do not. So they disappear them. Or someone is selling drugs but not enough. So they disappear them. Or maybe there is no reason. They do it because they can."

Cubillos is a member of the collective *Voz de los Desaparecidos en Puebla*, one of many such groups in Mexico that search for the *desaparecidos*. This collective was started in August 2018 by María Luisa Núñez Barojas, whose son, Juan De Dios Barojas, disappeared with two of his friends on April 28, 2017. Barojas lives in Tehuixtla, an area of Puebla City so dangerous that its residents don't go out at night. "We imposed a curfew," she said. "After six in the evening, nobody leaves their house." But the young men were still out after dark on that day in April. "That was enough to make him a victim."

In November 2017, after years of intense pressure from families of the *desaparecidos* and others, the Mexican government enacted the *Ley General en Materia de Desaparición* (General Law on Disappearance) and created the *Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda* (CNB, The National Commission for Searches), which is tasked with finding missing persons. In addition to the national CNB, there are CNBs in every state. Barojas said they received no help from the CNB-Puebla, so she started looking online for information and assistance. That's where she found out about the collectives that searched for *desaparecidos* in other states.

She was initially reluctant to join a collective or start one in Puebla. "I saw that the collectives were looking primarily in clandestine graves and I did not want to think that my son was dead," she said. "I saw that collectives made protest marches. I said, 'I am not going to find my son by marching.'" But in August of 2018, frustrated with the lack of help from the government, she decided to start *Voz de los Desaparecidos en Puebla* to help families find those who had disappeared.

Members of the collective search hospitals, psychiatric hospitals, pris-

A volunteer excavates a suspected grave. A *varilla* is behind him and a National Guardsman keeps watch.

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Members of the *colectivo* sift through dirt brought up from the well.

ons, and the streets, hoping to find *desaparecidos* who are still alive. But they also conduct searches for bodies a few times a month. Cubillos, who joined the collective a little more than two years ago, said someone in the group may get a phone call that tells them that "in a certain place there is a clandestine grave or in such a place they throw bodies." In July, the collective searched for Rosabella Sánchez Juárez's son, Rodrigo.

Rodrigo was studying for his bachelor's degree and had a job servicing pools. He left his home in San Sebastián El Seco, Puebla, on October 26, 2020, between 6:30 and 7:00 in the evening. When he didn't return home that night, his mother and his wife began sending him texts. "He never answered," Juárez said. "It was dawn and we did not know what happened. We could not say if the police took him or some other person." Rodrigo never returned. Juárez told me that although she's not sure who was responsible, she has her suspicions. "There are people who know but they do not say anything. Unfortunately, people are afraid and they do not talk about crime. For me, I lived in my bubble inside my home and did not have problems. But the bubble broke. They broke the bubble and I had to leave [home] and start investigating." For two days in July 2022, members of *Voz de los Desaparecidos en Puebla* searched for Rodrigo's body.

About twenty members of the collective drove to a large field in El Seco late in the morning of July 25, the first day of a two-day search. The field contained several deep, abandoned wells. The collective chose this area to search because, Barojas told me, "someone smelled decomposition and saw lime." Lime is used to cover bodies. Barojas added that "wells are places where criminals often dump bodies." They were accompanied by firemen, who would be lowered into the well, and five soldiers from the National Guard, who would provide protection. Several members of the collective have received threats. Since the beginning of 2021, at least five mothers who were searching for missing family members have been murdered in Mexico.

Before the search began, Juárez handed each person a small yellow *pílodora de éter* (ether pill). "People here have the belief that a culture of witchcraft exists and there is *mal aire*," she said. Literally, *mal aire* just means "bad air," but in this context *aire* refers to spirits and *mal aire* to evil spirits. "There is the belief that *pílodora de éter* keeps evil spirits and evil people away." Barojas took me aside. "Do not take photographs of their faces," she said, referring to the firemen and National Guard. "It is to keep them and their families safe. Criminals will look at social media and recognize

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"You have to think like a criminal," he said. "Where can I hide a body?"

faces." She also told me to use only the first names of the people I interviewed unless they gave me permission to use their full names.

Members of the collective know that they, too, are at risk. "Fear forms part of the searches," said Miguel Ángel Martínez Martínez. "There is fear, yes. There is uncertainty. But maybe I wouldn't call it fear because fear paralyzes." Martínez has been volunteering with the collective for three years, though none of his own family are among the *desaparecidos*. When I asked him why he does it, he immediately replied, "Why not? To me, it is a scandal." Later he added, "You have to be a little crazy to do this. You do not look with your mind, but with your heart."

As a fireman was lowered into a well, Juárez stood and stared, her eyes filling with tears. Barojas put her arms around her, consoling her. She knows the agony of losing a child and then finding his body. The collective found her son in November 2020. "They tortured him horribly," she told me. "They executed him, they threw him in a grave more than twenty meters deep. It hurts so much." She paused. "He is finally safe from so much evil. The torture of not knowing how he is doing is over."

Members of the collective talked and joked as they gathered for the search but fell silent as the first bag of dirt was brought up from the well and its contents dumped on a screen. The atmosphere was tense, a mix of hope and dread, as people knelt and sifted through the dirt, finding only bones of mice and some other animals. Later in the afternoon, Gregorio (not his real name), a member of the CNB-Puebla, led a group into the field to search for graves.

"You have to think like a criminal," he said. "'Where will I leave him? Do I want to carry a body up that hill? Where can I hide a body?'" He and Cubillos, who has been on many searches, looked for unevenness on the ground. "There may be a depression," Cubillos said. "The shape is usually round but sometimes square. If the grave is fresh, there is usually a mound but after a rain, the ground sinks a bit." Gregorio also looks for spots where the vegetation is different. "A buried body serves as fertilizer," he said. "The vegetation is greener.

Gregorio swept the ground with a metal detector and when it pinged or when he noticed a depression, he sunk a thin metal pole called a *varilla* into the ground. "If the *varilla* goes in easy," he said, "there may be a grave." Sometimes, when a hole is drilled, a smell of decomposition is released. "The smell of a human is very characteristic," he explained. "It is not the smell of a dog or a cat." Cubillos will also sniff the tip of the *varilla* to detect decomposition.

After locating what he thought might be a grave, he drew a twenty-by-twenty-centimeter square in the dirt and began to dig. He found some clothing, but no bodies. If a body is found, the digging stops. "When we find a body, we call in an anthropologist, an archeologist, and a criminalist," said Cubillos. "We do not touch or move the body. Sometimes it can be identified by clothing or a tattoo. Sometimes DNA is used to identify it."

No bodies were found during the two days of the search for Juárez's son. "This week, I did not sleep," she said. "I want to find him but not this way. I am glad we did not find anyone but sad we did not find anyone. It is a mix of emotions. I do not think that a criminal has a heart. To kill someone and carry them here…"

Many families of the *desaparecidos* don't conduct searches or investigations because they're afraid that those responsible for the disappearance of their loved ones may come after them. Those fears aren't unwarranted. Just how dangerous searching can be was tragically demonstrated last October, when Blanca Esmeralda Gallardo, a member of the Puebla collective, was investigating the disappearance of her daughter, who'd been missing since January 13, 2021. Although she'd received death threats several times, she continued her search. Gallardo was on her way to work before dawn on October 4 when a group of gunmen shot and killed her. Barojas is convinced it was the same people who had taken Gallardo's daughter. "Of course it was," Barojas said. "They know she had identified them. They wanted to eliminate the risk. As far as we know, she did not have any other affair or problem that would put her at risk." I asked Borojas for more details about Gallardo's life, but she couldn't—or wouldn't—provide any. "It is important that you know in the collective, we do not get involved in a person's life," she said. "Only up to what they permit. This is for safety." When I asked for permission to use a photo I took of Gallardo, her son, and her granddaughter at an event in Puebla, Borojas asked me to blur the faces of the two children.

Borojas told me that her group would continue searching for the *desaparecidos*, despite the killing of one of its members. "We will continue the struggle," she said. "We are redoubling security measures within the collective." Members of the collective believe that it's still important to search for people who have been missing for years. "It is to have the certainty that you can bring them here to the pueblo and leave them in holy ground," said Cubillos. "To let them rest in peace [so] that they are not in the underworld or in limbo. Because I believe that anyone who is missing wants to be found. We do not want revenge, only justice and, more than anything, to find our families."

My last interview with Juárez took place in a small room in the house that she'd recently moved into. She has moved five times since her son disappeared. "People here are afraid. People found out my situation and they said, 'We do not want problems.

Rosabella Sánchez Juárez (left) and María Luisa Núñez Barojas on the first day of the search

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Please move.' People really do not have empathy." Juárez had a series of low-paying jobs, including cleaning homes, but she no longer works. "Now that I am searching for my son, I do not work so I can dedicate myself to that," she told me. "My son, he sustained us. Our family has crumbled. When he disappeared, my son was twenty-six. Now he is twenty-eight." She still speaks about him in the present tense. "I believe now that they have already left me dead while alive. Yes, I have my daughter and granddaughters but I am missing another part. I am a single mother and for me, he was my man. They killed me. I am not afraid. They took what was my strength."

Her son Rodrigo's daughter is now four years old and troubled by his absence. "For her, he was everything. She always asks, 'Where is daddy?' and we tell her he is working, that he had to work far away and because of this he cannot come home. We have problems with her in school; she does not want to participate. His daughter needs to know where her father is. At minimum, if we find him dead, at least she can take him a flower. Because then we can cry. We look for him and I do not know what happened to him. We do not know if he is still alive, if he has something to eat, or, if they have killed him, where they left him."

I interviewed Juárez on the second anniversary of her son's disappearance. I asked her if she was going to do anything special to mark the day. She told me no. "I just want to remember what we talked about and what we did together, to keep him with me. I do not have anything more of him, nothing more than his memory. I have nothing more than those memories."

And so she and members of the *Voz de los Desaparecidos en Puebla* and other collectives across Mexico continue their search. The CNB website lists 103,261 *desaparecidos* in Mexico and 1,816 in Puebla. But since many families are afraid the people who took their relatives could come after them, they don't always report disappearances. That means there are many more lying buried somewhere. "The whole country is a clandestine grave," said Cubillos. "The whole country."

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Beyond the Caricatures

Christopher Ruddy

Benedict's theological legacy

Pope Benedict XVI is destined, for the time being, to be overshadowed by both his predecessor and his successor. He lacks their force of personality, their command of media, their "curb appeal." Over time, though, the understandable focus on his papal renunciation will be outweighed by his theological and magisterial legacy, particularly in his decades-long influence on the post-conciliar Church. I suspect this legacy will age well.

It isn't news to anyone that his reputation as a hierarch and a theologian is polarizing. Some see him as the one who, with John Paul II, stood in the breach during difficult decades and offered needed criteria for faithfully implementing Vatican II. Others see him as a good, even holy, man whose profound insights—especially on liturgy—were undermined by his quasi-modernist tendencies and passive leadership, culminating in his resignation. Still others see him as *the* personification of the betrayal of Vatican II's spirit of openness to the modern world and to a more inclusive Church.

Assessing his theological legacy, then, is complicated. We are simply too close to him to be able to see clearly and fully. And unlike, say, Karl Rahner or Hans Urs von Balthasar, he left no theological system, no magnum opus. He wasn't a specialist who dominated a particular area but a generalist whose arguments often need to be pieced together from his many essays and short books. He was a professor who, ironically, spent most of his adult life outside the academy. Finally, his scholarly legacy is complicated by his magisterial service as pope and as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF).

I do not pretend to objectivity with regard to Joseph Ratzinger. I first encountered his thought while writing my doctoral dissertation at Notre Dame. I was working on the relationship of local churches to the universal Church and questioned his argument for the priority of the universal Church. His position, I thought, reinforced Vatican centralization and didn't appreciate the contributions of local churches. I shared the view of most of my professors: Ratzinger was undeniably intelligent, but doctrinally rigid, pastorally insensitive, closed to modernity, a turncoat on Vatican II who lost his nerve amid post-conciliar tumult.

Reading him, though, set me—imperceptibly at first—on a decades-long journey. While reading his memoirs, *Milestones*, I was initially struck by his warmth and evident gratitude. As I continued on to *Salt of the Earth* and other interviews, I encountered an astute observer of Church and world who joined forthrightness and gentleness, piercing insight and disarming simplicity. The stereotypes and even caricatures thus began to fall away over time, and I entered into a theological and spiritual friendship with someone I never met. Above all, I came to see him as a believer who really knew and loved his Lord. That Christ-centeredness animated his entire life as a theologian and a Church leader; to me, it remains consoling and challenging.

In assessing his contested legacy, then, I wish to highlight four "nodes" that stand at the heart of his theology. These aren't exhaustive: important themes—such as eschatology and the relationship between faith and reason—will need to be left aside.

The first node is Ratzinger's seemingly self-evident insistence that Christianity is about Christ. One might respond, "Well, what else would it be about?" Ratzinger sums up his meaning at the beginning of his first papal encyclical, *Deus caritas est*: "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction." It is not enough to see Christ as a moral example or a great teacher whose significance lies outside of himself, in the way that Buddha's finger points at the moon

or Muhammed serves as Allah's transcriber. He is, rather, the kingdom of God in person, and Christianity is nothing other than the encounter with the person of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, this person's deepest identity is that he is Son of the Father. This is the "true center of his personality," as Ratzinger puts it in *Jesus of Nazareth*. In constant prayer and love, Christ *is* his relationship with the Father: he receives all of himself from his Father. And this divine sonship issues forth in human communion with others: "His entire being is expressed by the word 'pro-existence'—he is there, not for himself, but for others. This is not merely a dimension of his existence, but its innermost essence and entirety." To be Christian, likewise, is not so much to "do good" or to assent to doctrines, but to become, in Jesus, a son or daughter of the Father. Our response, Ratzinger insists, is always preceded and made possible by receiving God's loving gift.

This Christocentrism gives rise to one of the most surprising aspects of Ratzinger's thought and life: the quiet, reserved scholar's warm, affective, even pietistic emphasis on friendship with Jesus. Such emphasis is not native to many older Catholic ears, sounding too "evangelical" or "Jesus and me"–ish. Ratzinger stated that his purpose in writing *Jesus of Nazareth* was his worry that "[i]ntimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching at thin air," because of scholars and preachers who cast doubt on the reliability of Scripture. Similarly, the usually overlooked heart of his "dictatorship of relativism" homily, delivered just before the 2005 conclave that elected him pope, was a lyrical invitation to adult friendship with Jesus—one grounded in firm doctrine as well as mutual trust and intimacy. Those who saw him only as "God's Rottweiler" or as an aloof professor might have been surprised to hear him say, before the College of Cardinals and the rest of the world, "Thank you, Jesus, for your friendship!"

These emphases on Christ's person, his sonship, and our friendship with him drove Ratzinger's resistance to various kinds of reductionisms: Christ as merely one among humanity's great religious sages, as primarily a liberator from earthly evils, as an ordinary human person with an exceptional experience of God, as only one savior among others. *Dominus Iesus* (2000) was perhaps the most controversial document issued by the CDF while Ratzinger was prefect (rivaled only by its 1984 instruction on liberation theology and its 1986 letter on homosexuality). Although *Dominus Iesus* caused needless ecumenical tension in its oversimplified account of other Christian communities, its essential core was simply

Pope Benedict XVI at his desk in the papal residence at Castel Gandolfo, Italy, 2010

CNS PHOTO/VATICAN MEDIA

the reaffirmation of the most fundamental Christian beliefs: Jesus Christ, fully divine and fully human, is Lord and the one and only savior of all humanity; the Church, as Christ's one and only Body, is uniquely connected to his saving mission and therefore not equivalent to other religions. This is simply Christian bedrock, without which the faith is in vain.

Ratzinger's Christological concern continued with a 2001 Notification against the Belgian Jesuit Jacques Dupuis (which the late Cardinal Francis George of Chicago acknowledged was an "unfortunate example" and not "thought out well enough") and a 2004 Notification which declared that the American Jesuit Roger Haight's writings on Christ, salvation, and the Trinity contained "serious doctrinal errors contrary to the divine and catholic faith of the Church." Nearly twenty years later, it is troubling to me that Ratzinger's upholding of the Church's Christological and Trinitarian teachings seems passé or even oppressive in theological circles that are effectively post-Christian in their narrow focus on anthropology and critical theory.

These doctrinal controversies point to a second node: for Ratzinger, theology is inherently ecclesial. It grows from the heart of the Church. The theologian's primary and most essential (but not exclusive) home is the Church. He or she is not an academic free agent, but one whose "raw materials" are drawn from the divine revelation entrusted to the Church through the apostles. For Ratzinger, then, the conflict between academic freedom and apostolic faith is often spurious. In fact, he turns this conflict on its head, arguing that Church doctrine, far from being restrictive, is "generative" of genuine theological creativity. He laments those theologians who, "though personally orthodox, in their scholarly work were emulators of liberalism," and who saw theology's ecclesial identity primarily as a "shackle."

That said, *Donum veritatis*, the CDF's 1990 Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian, does acknowledge the tensions that can exist between theologians and the magisterium. It affirms further the right and even the duty of theologians to make known to ecclesial authorities their difficulties with Church teaching. Reading both Ratzinger and *Donum veritatis* on the theological task calls to mind Henri de Lubac's *Splendor of the Church*. Written by a theologian who suffered deeply at the hands of ecclesial authorities and who, precisely in that suffering, fell even more soberly and deeply in love with the Church, de Lubac's book remains indispensable for anyone who seeks to be a truly ecclesial theologian and believer. Given Ratzinger's long friendship and grateful debt to the Jesuit cardinal, I am convinced that *Splendor* shaped his thinking on the ecclesial nature of theology.

Donum veritatis also makes clear that theologians and Church authorities exist only in relation to the entire people of God. In his own writings, Ratzinger returns time and again to what he calls the faith of the "little ones" or the "simple," who, though insignificant in worldly terms, keep the faith alive across the centuries. He has in mind biblical figures such as Simeon and Anna, as well as more modern ones such as the Bavarian farmers and tradesmen he knew in his youth (not least his policeman father and homemaker mother). In this context, he criticizes experts who are contemptuous of ordinary believers. His own willingness to venture into theological fields beyond his own—e.g. Scripture and liturgy—was an attempt to share the riches of the faith that some scholars had either restricted through a kind of guild mentality or even undercut in their presumed sophistication. His efforts annoyed some academics who criticized what they saw as his lack of specialization and scholarly expertise. It would be hard, for instance, to find a more despised—I use this word advisedly—figure in some professional and scholarly liturgical circles than Ratzinger.

This contentious relationship—even animus—leads to a third node. Liturgy will undoubtedly be the most visible, divisive aspect of his legacy for the foreseeable future. He has argued that the Church's contemporary crisis is "to a large extent due to the disintegration of the liturgy." That bold claim will seem hyperbolic or irresponsible unless one properly grasps the nature of Christian worship.

Liturgy, for Ratzinger, is not primarily a communal activity that one does on Sunday in order to fuel up for the Church's work in the "real" world. It is instead the central, ultimate reality of human existence. The human person is a worshiping creature who is most him- or herself when glorifying God. Christ himself is the perfect worshiper of his Father. Orthodoxy, Ratzinger notes, is "right worship" before it is "right doctrine." Christian liturgy, then, is above all about glorifying God; it is centered on God, and only in being so does it contribute to our sanctification. As Ratzinger puts it in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, the "only goal" of the Exodus was to enable Israel to worship God rightly, as he wished to be worshiped. Idolatry-leading-to-apostasy is conversely the primal sin of Israel and the Church.

Because liturgy is primarily a divine gift before it is a human response, any true liturgical reform must be organic. It must regard the liturgy as, to use Ratzinger's image, a plant to be tended rather than a machine to be rebuilt or made more efficient. This is the source of his call for a "new liturgical movement, which will call to life the real heritage of the Second Vatican Council."

This is where the controversy goes into overdrive. While acknowledging gains from the post-conciliar liturgical reforms, Ratzinger frequently criticized both their genesis and their consequences. Their genesis, he argues, was unprecedented in scope. The post-conciliar reforms went beyond (and even against) the decrees of Vatican II—and far beyond any preceding reforms. Moreover, the reforms were problematically entrusted to a group of experts who believed that they had a mandate to revise the liturgy according to modern scholarship (some of it now outdated or discredited) and their perceptions of the needs of modern believers. Ratzinger holds, in effect, that *Concilium* (the Second Vatican Council itself) and *Consilium* (the Vatican body that directed the immedi-

ate post-conciliar liturgical changes) cannot be equated. He affirms Vatican II's teaching while questioning key dimensions of its implementation.

The post-conciliar changes, combined with the effective prohibition of the pre-conciliar liturgy, introduced a "breach…whose consequences could only be tragic." Such liturgical excess and rupture threaten the Church's very identity and authority:

> A community is calling its very being into question when it suddenly declares that what until now was its holiest and highest possession is strictly forbidden and when it makes the longing for it seem downright indecent. Can it be trusted any more about anything else? Won't it proscribe again tomorrow what it prescribes today?

Summorum pontificum—Benedict's 2007 letter liberalizing the use of what he called the "extraordinary form" of the Roman Rite and its attendant sacraments—was intended neither as a restorationist move nor as a mere concession to the Priestly Society of St. Pius X and elderly Catholics attached to the older liturgy. Instead, he held that the Church needed "interior reconciliation" with its own tradition and "mutual enrichment" between the two forms of the Roman Rite. He hoped the Church would recover its venerable heritage and be open to legitimate development.

With his 2021 letter *Traditionis custodes*, Pope Francis has effectively reversed Benedict's efforts. It is a strikingly public repudiation. Some may try to minimize the conflict or hope that it will gradually disappear. They can't, and it won't. Although the numbers of Catholics involved are relatively small, they represent a highly motivated group. As a teacher and speaker, I have been surprised by how many laypeople, seminarians, and clergy identify *The Spirit of the Liturgy* as their favorite among Ratzinger's writings. They attest that it has deeply changed—even if only gradually—how they understand the liturgy. Not all of them participate in the older liturgy, but they are all committed to more reverent forms of worship. It will take decades, possibly centuries, to heal the liturgical wound in Roman Catholicism.

One model of what that healing might look like is offered by the personal ordinariates—equivalent to dioceses—that Benedict established for Anglicans and Episcopalians who wished to enter corporately into full communion with the Catholic Church. These communities, in their fragility and their strength, exemplify Vatican II's vision of liturgy that glorifies God through the active participation of all believers, and a vision of a Catholicism capacious enough to receive the wealth of the Anglican patrimony and confident enough to reclaim its own heritage.

My final node is what I call the "style" of salvation history: "God is not loud. He does not make headlines," as Ratzinger said in a homily. This quiet gentleness forms the climax of *Jesus of Nazareth*, which he knew would be his theological last will and testament:

> It is part of the mystery of God that he acts so gently, that he only gradually builds up *his* history within the great history of mankind; that he becomes man and so can be overlooked by his contemporaries and by the decisive forces within history.…
>
> And yet—is not this the truly divine way? Not to overwhelm with external power, but to give freedom, to offer and elicit love. And if we really think about it, is it not what seems so small that is truly great?

Tracey Rowland has perceptively noted that Ratzinger is drawn to what is affective, natural, interior, organic, communal; conversely, there is an "aversion to the ugliness of the industrialized world" and its rationalism and materialism. Her comments point to what I would call the monastic, particularly Benedictine cast of Ratzinger's thought and life: a simple, regular life of prayer, work, reading, and community.

This emphasis on the small and seemingly insignificant nature of divine action in the world, together with Ratzinger's repeated predictions (dating back to the 1950s) that the Church of the future would be smaller, stripped of its institutions and social influence, has given rise to perhaps the most baseless yet widespread criticism of his thought: that he desires a "smaller but purer" Church shorn of its dissenting and even merely lukewarm believers. I sometimes wonder whether the real object of this criticism is Ratzinger himself or the unpopular Church teachings on, say, sexuality and ordained ministry that he upheld in the face of pressure for change.

In any case, Ratzinger unambiguously rejects any form of spiritual elitism or Donatism. Instead, at the heart of his theology is the thoroughly biblical conviction that God saves the many through the one or the few: Abraham is chosen to be the father of many nations; Israel is elected for the sake of the Gentiles, Christ—the new Adam—gives his life for the sake of all; the Church's mission is to be light to the nations. God prefers to start small and to use mustard seeds to accomplish his work of salvation. The Church is open to all, and whether big or small, the greatest gift that it can offer the world is being itself and living the twofold commandment of love of God and neighbor.

As a theologian and as a hierarch, Ratzinger played a long game, trusting in divine providence. In his papal installation homily, he said, "God, who became a lamb, tells us that the world is saved by the Crucified One, not by those who crucified him. The world is redeemed by the patience of God. It is destroyed by the impatience of man." I believe that this humble trust in providence fostered his sense of being a simple "worker in the vineyard of the Lord" and sustained his decision to step down from the papacy.

Now the last surviving major participant at Vatican II is gone. An ecclesial era has ended. The man who grew up under Nazism, who resisted Marxism and theological liberalism, has passed. There are new movements in the world and in the Church, new signs of the times, for good and for ill. Still, I am convinced that the stature of this "mustard seed" theologian and hierarch will grow over the coming decades and bear much fruit.

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The Limits of 'Longtermism'

Meghan Sullivan

What some champions of 'effective altruism' get wrong about our relationship to future generations

In November 2022, the Powerball lottery jackpot reached $1.9 billion and, for the first time in my life, I bought a ticket. It started as a joke. A friend was celebrating a birthday, and I'd gone to the gas station to buy *him* a lottery ticket. I figured, why not? I would enjoy being rich. But as I waited for the magic numbers to be revealed, I ruminated about what I would do with a billion-dollar post-tax windfall. I'd need to convert the money into something truly significant, something that would stand the test of time. I found myself Googling how much it costs to buy a school. I figured I could bankroll at least a few great new schools with all of my money. Maybe I would use my largesse to single-handedly transform educational opportunities in Northern Indiana, or even start a major foundation that would harness the stock market to create schools perpetually. This would not be easy. There is that whole challenge of the teacher shortage. I would have to figure out what curriculum exactly would make these schools so transformative, and how to make sure my fellow Hoosiers would send their children to my transformative schools. I started to worry that converting dollars into units of human enlightenment would prove overwhelming, given how little I know about K–12 education. I'd need to hire consultants to do it right. And that was as far as I got in my planning when I learned that I had not won the Powerball.

Effective altruism proponent William MacAskill speaks at TED2018 in Vancouver, Canada.

BRET HARTMAN/TED

In the roaring 2020s, there are plenty of stories about people relentlessly assembling eye-popping fortunes, and about their ambitious plans for how to deploy them. Elon Musk, one of the richest people in the world, is said to sleep on the floor of his Twitter office. His self-reported philanthropic motivations include securing an extra-planetary future for the human race and saving democracy through social media. Musk makes me self-conscious that my moral imagination only got as far as buying schools. He seems willing to throw all his vast resources at these goals…yet always ends up reinvesting in himself.

In one of the more fascinating recent episodes of modern capitalism, one week after I lost the Powerball, thirty-year-old cryptocurrency trader Sam Bankman-Fried lost over $15 billion in personal wealth. While most of the news coverage focused on how a single man amassed, grossly mismanaged, and then abruptly lost such a fortune, a crucial subplot focused on Bankman-Fried's philosophical interests. Living relatively frugally, he committed over a billion dollars to an ethical project called "longtermism." The grants he made were Muskian in their tastes and scale of ambition: Bankman-Fried was interested in developing and regulating artificial intelligence, in identifying and training high-talent STEM students, and in forecasting and preventing future pandemics. His largest grants went to optimizing and spreading the longtermist movement. In summer 2022, sources like the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times* ran feature pieces introducing longtermism as the future of ethics.

The architects of longtermist philanthropy wanted it to work with a perpetual start-up ethos: a very tight inner circle, big risks, and betting on their own smarts to power through the inevitable obstacles.

For those new to the discussion, longtermism is a combination of two significant and perennially controversial assumptions. First, the longtermists assume that *measurable impact matters the most in ethics*. This assumption is part of an ethical system called utilitarianism. Just as you might try to maximize the return you get from a financial investment, so should you try to maximize the return you get from an ethical investment. The return on investment might be measured in the number of lives saved or improved—or even in the number of good lives created. If you have a choice between spending two dollars on a gag birthday gift for a friend or on purchasing a mosquito net for someone at risk of contracting malaria, utilitarianism says to go for the mosquito net. Crucially, utilitarians say that philanthropists should not be biased by more narrow considerations like their personal relationships, histories, or emotional attachments. Ethics is the discipline of getting rid of such biases to focus on what's most valuable. Sam Bankman-Fried's parents, both Stanford professors, raised him to be fluent in this kind of optimization paradigm. He framed most of his decisions about what to eat, where to travel, and how to invest in terms of "EVs," or "units of expected value."

The second assumption of longtermism is that *the time of the impact does not matter in ethics*. This assumption is sometimes called temporal neutrality. It does not matter whether lives get better immediately, or pretty soon, or even in humanity's distant future. Ethical philanthropists should be willing to make calculated now-for-later tradeoffs, and should consider their effect on merely possible future people, not just current actual people. Our emotions cause us to pay much more attention to events that may occur soon, but these emotions are just as biasing as our idiosyncratic personal attachments. A crucial feature of temporal neutrality is that it encourages us to distinguish between the real risks that come with any future-directed tradeoff (which should be weighed in our decision making) and our innate, present-biased fears, which can make us imprudent.

Utilitarianism and temporal neutrality have been debated seriously in philosophy departments for at least 150 years. Prototypes of each assumption even appear in the Platonic dialogues two thousand years ago, where Socrates and his Greek friends tried to get to the bottom of how the "art of measurement" figures in a good life. What has changed recently is that a small cadre of extraordinarily wealthy men—and they are nearly all men—have emerged with the resources to practice this ethical system at scale. As he grew his crypto fortune, Bankman-Fried partnered with Silicon Valley philanthropy wonks and philosophers at elite universities to create a charity called the FTX Future Fund. The Future Fund set out to make grants of at least $100 million a year based on four longtermist ideas about value and control. First, humanity's overriding ethical aim should be to protect future generations by focusing on the distant future as much as the near. Second, now is the "crucial time in human history" for shaping that future. Third, the best means for pursuing ethical goals is to invest in "ambitious people and projects." And finally, the ethical pioneers must be willing to fail often in order to "succeed at scale."

In the twentieth century, most major philanthropies set up endowments with oversight boards; their founders, who were usually financiers, took on more of a patronage role. When John D. Rockefeller set up his blockbuster foundation in 1913, he turned over decision making to an independent board almost immediately. "I have not had the hardihood even to suggest how people, so much more experienced and wise in those things than I, should work out the details even of those plans with which I have had the honor to be associated." Rockefeller wanted an opportunity to transform money earned through his often brutal capitalist tactics into something with moral significance. What he wanted from his foundation was a kind of reputational immortality: the Red Cross and other institutions would keep doing good in his name long after he died. He assumed that the tactics that helped him build a vast oil empire by age thirty-nine might not be the best methods for expanding the American Red Cross.

In the twenty-first century, there is less and less of a boundary between the financial and philanthropic activities of the world's richest men. In launching the Future Fund, Bankman-Fried opted for a move-fast and pay-as-you-go model. Some of the Future Fund's million-plus-dollar grants were applied for in a single day and approved within two weeks. The architects of longtermist philanthropy wanted it to work with a perpetual start-up ethos: a very tight inner circle, big risks, and betting on their own smarts to power through the inevitable obstacles.

The longtermists certainly gained experience failing at scale in November 2022. When Bankman-Fried's crypto exchanges imploded, all the pledged grants suddenly evaporated. The Future

Fund's advisors, in Millennial fashion, posted their resignation note on Twitter. And as the fraud charges rolled in, the outspoken proponents of longtermism found themselves unwitting participants in a morality play.

Just as we are now coming to terms with whether digital tokens will ever be the future of money, we should also be wrestling with the ethical framework guiding the decisions of these wealthy longtermists. Understanding the strange way their movement thinks about time, money, and their power to control both can give us insight into how our new boom-and-bust crypto economy is changing our approach to ethics.

Utilitarianism has always had a complicated relationship with time and money. In the mid-1800s, Cambridge professor Henry Sidgwick was one of the great leaders of the movement. He instructed his protégés that time itself was irrelevant to ethics; utilitarians should just aim to have the biggest possible impact: "Hereafter as such is to be regarded as neither less nor more important than Now." As a matter of practice, Sidgwick and his fellow Victorian-era utilitarians worked on current problems and used existing institutions. They engaged with Parliament, developed philosophical curricula, experimented with religious movements, and lobbied for better working conditions across the British factory system. They were also remarkably democratic for their time—the most significant impact the early utilitarians had was in convincing their contemporaries that women, the poor, and nonwhite people have interests that were just as morally significant as those of rich white men.

It isn't an accident that utilitarian thinking came into its own at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. Utilitarianism is unimaginable without capitalism—without its confidence in the power of money to move systems and its mechanisms for measuring efficiency. Pre-capitalist ethical systems offer us much more complex and sometimes contradictory advice on the role money plays in a morally good life. Consider Christianity. Jesus tells his followers that it's harder for a rich person to have eternal life than it is for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle. But he also condemns followers who do not make prudent future investments and grow their resources. But he also praises a seemingly crooked financial agent who, expecting to get fired, preemptively renegotiated all the debts owed to his master. Jesus tells a would-be disciple to sell all his earthly possessions to follow him. And then, when Judas suggests that Mary Magdalene sell some expensive perfume to feed the poor, Jesus upbraids him: "the poor will always be with us." The only consistent message about money throughout the New Testament seems to be that we should handle it very cautiously, like a kind of moral nitroglycerin.

With the rise of capitalism, money began to feel less magical and more scientific. In the 1700s, the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, encouraged his followers to pursue wealth but with holy intentions for distributing it: "Those who gain all they can and save all they can should also give all they can so that they will grow in grace and lay up a treasure in heaven." By the 1800s, a feedback loop had developed in Europe between, on the one hand, Protestant ideas about election and sanctification and, on the other, capitalist ideas about earning and investing. Holy people earned more and invested prudently in the Church and their communities, which then grew and endured. Max Weber noticed this social phenomenon and wrote *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

The utilitarians simplified this Wesleyan motto, subtracting the heavenly goal. And by the mid-twentieth century, utilitarianism had evolved to tie its moral goals much more closely to personal finance. A good person in capitalism should aim to "earn to give." For decades, the utilitarian Peter Singer has taught a course at Princeton called Practical Ethics, encouraging Ivy Leaguers to take up high-earning finance jobs and then redirect their individual incomes to very efficient charities. The particular philanthropic targets have changed over time: in the 1970s you needed to donate to people suffering from famines in Southeast Asia and to organizations promoting vegetarianism and nuclear de-proliferation. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the focus was on reducing deaths from malaria and direct financial transfers to the world's poorest people. Singer and other modern utilitarians take pains to discourage donations to institutions that don't have efficient, measurable moral production functions. In 2013, he caused a bit of a stir by criticizing patrons of the Make-A-Wish foundation who granted a gravely ill Seattle boy's superhero role-playing dreams. According to Singer, this was sentimental moral inefficiency at its worst. He and other leading twentieth-century utilitarians have strenuously inveighed against donations to art museums, religious groups, and universities. Such institutions, they claim, don't need your money or attention, and don't convert dollars to impact the way utilitarian philanthropy does.

In the late twentieth century, most practicing adherents of this form of utilitarianism came from a set of former philosophy majors of modest means. Most of the rest of us, meanwhile, continued to let our philanthropic ambitions be guided haphazardly by school, church, and community fundraisers. Our overriding ethical goals stayed focused on being good parents, colleagues, neighbors, and coworkers. We valued participation over optimization. But at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the utilitarian program surprised everyone by migrating out of philosophy lecture halls and into industry, in particular to new financial-services and technology companies. Whereas Singer hoped to influence more traditional billionaires with somewhat more regular assets (think Bill Gates and Warren Buffet), these new utilitarians focused on tech iconoclasts like Elon Musk and unconventional financial instruments like cryptocurrency. This focus on the new economy also shows up in the advice utilitarians have started to give for how to fulfill our ethical obligations. They've moved on from malaria; now the overwhelming focus is on shaping artificial intelligence and empowering a generation of prophetic technologists.

The vision has been laid out in a series of popular books over the past few years, most of them coming out of the University of Oxford, where William MacAskill, one of Singer's acolytes, is a professor. MacAskill has been one of the most prolific advocates for "effective altruism," especially in Silicon Valley and on elite college campuses. Unlike the typical Oxford don, he embraced public engagement early in his career. He founded a nonprofit called 80,000 Hours to help college students find careers that will empower them to have the greatest measurable moral impact. He has published almost exclusively with trade presses. While he lives on a modest 31,000 pounds a year, he has Elon Musk on speed dial and has become the philosophical spokesman for the new strain of technologically financed utilitarianism. He was the key ethics adviser for the FTX Future Fund.

In his 2022 longtermist manifesto, *What We Owe the Future*, MacAskill resurrects the old Sidgwickian idea that utilitarians should consider future impact just as much as present impact. What he adds is the idea that we can make our own present moral codes into longstanding, potentially immortal codes, particularly by building them into the generalized artificial-intelligence (AI) systems that we are now creating. MacAskill often borrows a term from investing, "locking in," to describe how our future will be determined. If you want to have enough money for retirement when you're sixty-five, you have to lock it in when you are much younger, by committing resources to, say, a good 401(k) plan. If you miss the investment window, perhaps by ignoring the power of the stock plan and its compound interest, then you are certain to regret it. Likewise, MacAskill argues that we are at a point when human civilization is like an emerging adult, but one with extraordinary technological powers to lock in its future prospects. MacAskill believes that as we outsource more and more of our decision making to AI, it will come to have a power that is more far-reaching and durable than our older, squishier moral technologies—namely religious, educational, political, and cultural institutions.

In MacAskill's vision, the fundamental question for our generation is what kind of immortal code we will allow to take over. He doesn't really suggest there are competing ethical ideas that might get locked in; rather, the question is whether we will allow the future to evolve in a chaotic and uncontrolled way or whether we will use our powers to guide it toward the best outcome. He hopes visionaries will lead us into this brave new world by engineering AI that aligns with our philosophical goals. And he urges the reader to be afraid of the existential risks of failing to do so. If we focus too much of our energy on marginal improvements to the squishy institutions of church, state, commerce, and charity and neglect the AI revolution, we might inadvertently hasten a humanity-destroying climate, pathogenic, or weapon event. He insists: "Few people who will ever live have as much power to positively influence the future as we do."

The sixteenth-century astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus shocked the scientific establishment by discovering that the Earth was not the center of the universe. In fact, there is no place in the universe that everywhere else depends on. The Earth is special to us because it is where we happen to live, not because it is the planet around which everything else revolves. This idea, which revolutionized physics, is often called the "mediocrity principle." It has an analogue in how we think of time and value. The present era might be special to us because it is when our lives are occurring, but no point in time is any more special from the standpoint of the moral universe. This was exactly Sidgwick's point when he urged that Hereafter and Now are on the same ethical footing.

This sense of time pushes us to befriend other generations rather than to treat them like mere subjects. The meaning of our lives is determined in part by how we respond to the moves of previous generations and process their mistakes. Our descendants will accept some of our plans and reject others. Our values and projects will be part of how they understand the meaning of their lives, but they'll also add their own chapters to the human story.

New technological developments tempt their developers to deny mediocrity. Archimedes thought his Greek civilization was the fulcrum on which the future of humanity turned. I suspect Robert Oppenheimer had the same thought in 1940 when he grasped the power of the nuclear bomb. They were both right about the changes they were witnessing but mistaken about their capacity to predict or control the future. It's hard to lock anything in, and we should be thankful that no previous generation had the kind of control that longtermists like MacAskill envision. Intergenerational ethics is and should be a perpetual negotiation.

Samuel Scheffler, a philosopher at NYU, has written movingly about how wrestling with the temporal mediocrity of our lives motivates us. "The vastness and impersonality of time are every bit as chilling and awe-inspiring as the vastness and impersonality of space, and the need for a refuge—for some that serves the function of a place in time—is, for many people, almost as strong as the need for a place in space." For Scheffler, we build ourselves homes in time by attaching our lives to the squishy traditions and institutions. It starts with small, personal habits. Every Tuesday morning you have a coffee with your coworkers, and however else your job might change, you start to believe that those Tuesday mornings will be there to return to. The two years of pandemic quarantines were soul-crushing in part because they razed so many of these traditions, replacing them with one bizarre, repeating, lonely day.

Successful institutions create homes in time that expand beyond the confines of our lives and are there to greet future inhabitants. Our ancestors attended school, voted, and lit candles in church sanctuaries. We hope that our children and grandchildren will do the same, and we also expect that they will make adjustments to the systems. We do not hope these institutions endure because we think our current methods of education, governance, or worship maximize expected value. They do pretty well. Rather, we want our short lives to be connected to the lives of others, and to be a bit more significant as a result. We want our ethical endeavors to have a slightly bigger parcel of temporal real estate.

In the twenty-first century, trust in institutions is at a low point, and so is our confidence that schools, governments, or religions will offer us such opportunities. Financial abuses have been a major part of the problem. Institutions require a massive amount of work to maintain, and the potential for corruption is ever present. Consider Pope Francis's recent efforts to untangle decades-long trails of corruption in Vatican finances. The new crypto economy feeds off of our current moment of widespread institutional degradation. It advertises itself as a workaround. The promise of crypto is that we can conduct our financial lives without trusting banks or governments, instead putting our trust in immortal cryptographic protocols and the engineers who establish them. The longtermists have tried to tie this vision to a moral mission.

But money has never had quite as much power as utilitarians have wished. And as we expand our temporal concern, we'd do well to remember the unique ethical power of institutions. The future is deeply uncertain, with risks and opportunities we can barely grasp. Future people will no doubt be affected by our current decisions, but they aren't our dependents, and there is no reason to suppose their lives will be entirely determined by the technology we build for them now. They will have their own moral goals, which they'll develop in the schools, economies, and political and cultural institutions that we build together and bequeath to them. And future generations are likely to reflect on the era of Bankman-Fried and crypto-philanthropy in the same complex and judgmental way we look back at John Rockefeller and petroleum-driven philanthropy. The power of good intergenerational institutions like schools, governments, religions, and, yes, even conventional philanthropies run by boards and endowments is that they embrace temporal mediocrity. If we care about making a long-lasting, flexible, and democratic impact, the lesson we should learn from the brief, bizarre life of the FTX Future Fund is that all those squishy institutions are still among our best moral technologies.

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We should be thankful that no previous generation had the kind of control that longtermists like MacAskill envision. Intergenerational ethics is and should be a perpetual negotiation.

Ahead of His Time, Behind Ours

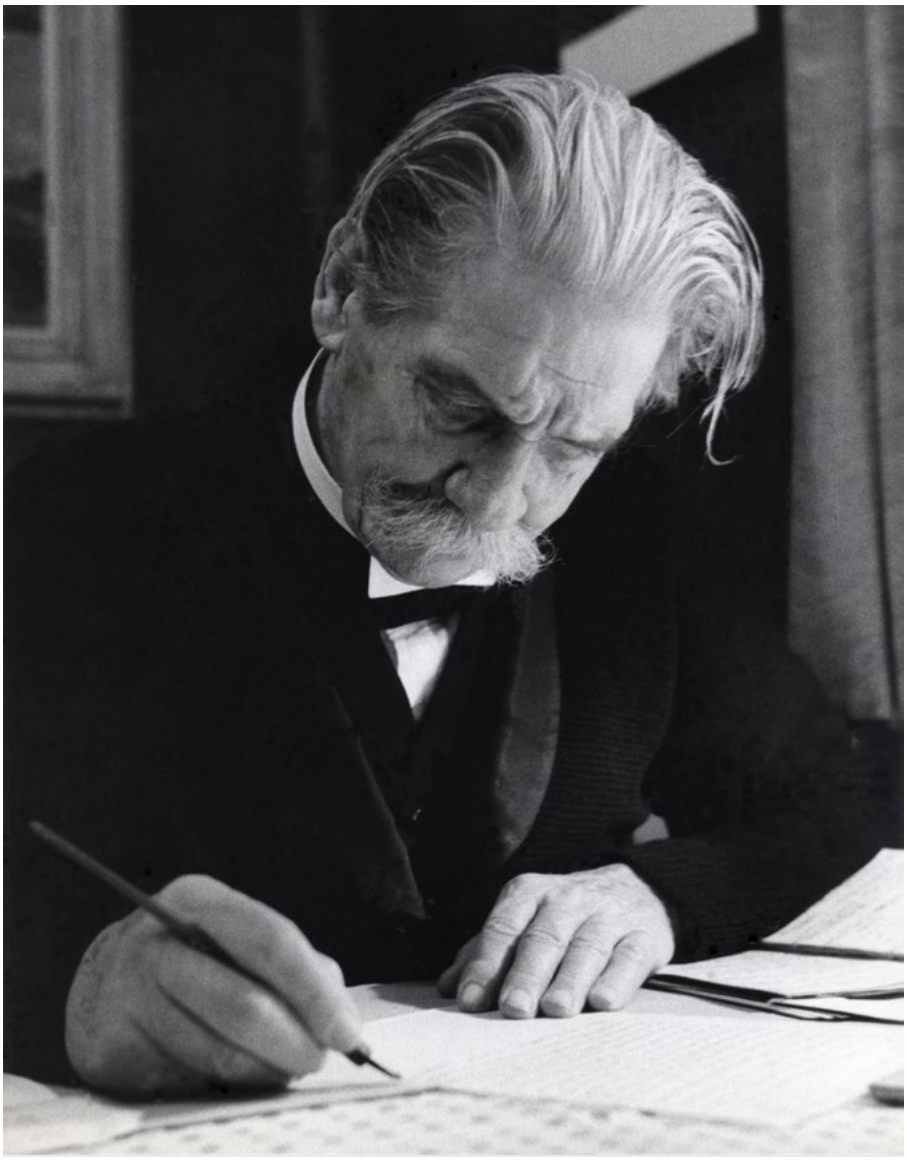
Xan Smiley

Can we still admire Albert Schweitzer?

It was partly Albert Schweitzer's looks that caught the world's imagination: the bristling walrus mustache, the swept-up shock of silvery hair, the penetrating yet kindly glare of the wise man standing against a backdrop of jungle and river. It was the romance of his life, too. A scholar nearing middle age, with doctorates in theology, philosophy, music, and medicine, he decided as an act of penitence to go to the deep interior of Africa to heal the sick, bringing with him a piano wrapped in a zinc case so he could play Bach in the evening among the cicadas and snakes. And it was the sheer self-sacrifice of the undertaking: around the time of his arrival in 1913, a fifth of all white people in the district would die of accidents and disease in a single year. As for the local Africans, three-quarters of the inhabitants in one nearby village of two thousand would soon perish under a single wave of sleeping sickness. This was the heart of Africa that Schweitzer had come to embrace—and where, half a century later, he laid down his life for it.

As you look out across the placid brown waters of the Ogooué River, half a mile wide, where hippos and crocodiles still swim, the remorseless heat thuds into you, just as it must have assailed this doctor from Alsace when he chugged a hundred miles upstream from the Atlantic coast in a paddle steamer and was rowed ashore in a canoe. In those days it was part of French Equatorial Africa. Since 1960 it has been part of the independent state of Gabon.

A shimmering magic still infuses the village of Lambaréné, where Schweitzer built his hospital. The old chicken hut where he first tended to the sick is now preserved as a museum. The doctor's bedroom, with white mosquito netting wrapped around a simple bed, has been turned into a memento of his simplicity. His piano, with yellowed ivories now rotten, adorns a little dressing room next door. His big brown leather shoes grace a bedside table, along with a tin wash basin.



Albert Schweitzer, 1961

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His first of many books, *On the Edge of the Primeval Forest*, published in English in 1922, tells of the hardships and frustrations he endured in creating his hospital. The locals were ravaged by the malign effects of slavery the century before and still lived according to traditional beliefs and customs. They attributed almost any illness to poison or evil spirits cast by jealous neighbors or rival tribes; none could be sent to tend to a member of another tribe for fear of retribution. Schweitzer characterized them as unreliable—resistant to the merits of keeping time, of providing regular labor to help build the hospital, of not spreading contagious diseases, of not stealing, of not lying, of not getting drunk. Cannibalism, he relates, "has not quite been extirpated" among the most powerful of the local tribes. The mentally ill were sometimes pitched into the river to drown.

In his day, Albert Schweitzer was a forerunner of Mother Teresa as the nearest thing to a living saint. Winston Churchill called him "a genius of humanity." *Life* magazine in 1947 said he was "the greatest man in the world." Two years later, *Time* put him on the cover. Albert Einstein wrote that "nowhere have I ever found such an ideal union of goodness and passion for beauty as in Albert Schweitzer." A reverential film about him won an Oscar. Bertrand Russell sought his friendship and advice. After Adlai Stevenson twice ran in vain to be America's president, he thought it wise, as ambassador to the United Nations, to visit Lambaréné in a private plane to ponder the world's future with the guru. Even James Cameron, an admired British journalist whose writings were among the first to query Schweitzer's saintly status, described him as "the only man in this century who has become famous by being good." When Schweitzer won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952, for which he had several times been nominated, he gave his reputation an even more dazzling shine by promptly using the prize money to build a leper colony. When Barack Obama won the same prize in 2009, he duly invoked the name of Schweitzer.

At the core of his belief was a love of nature and a desire not to kill any living being.

In some ways famously determined to set his face against the modern world, Schweitzer nonetheless championed causes that years later have become fashionable. In his early years as a philosopher and theologian, he caused a stir by exploring Jesus' mental health and sexuality: see his *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* and *The Psychiatric Study of Jesus*. He sympathetically examined a range of non-Christian religions, especially Hinduism. His eventual credo, which he termed "Reverence for Life," sprang suddenly into his mind when he was in a boat on the Ogooué River, "an unexpected discovery, like a revelation in the midst of intense thought." This he regarded as his greatest contribution to ethics and the one by which he wanted most to be remembered. At the core of his belief was a love of nature and a desire not to kill any living being—crocodiles, rats, even ants and mosquitoes. He became a vegetarian.

He was an early tree-hugging environmentalist, deploring the depredations of the timber merchants who cut

down the forests around Lambaréné. He inveighed against pesticides. Sometimes mocked, even in his lifetime, for his perceived hostility to mechanization and modernity, he could nowadays be hailed as prophetically ahead of his time for his espousal of green causes and his advocacy of humanity's need to honor the natural world. In 1939 he wrote:

> The slightest disturbance of the now existing atmospheric conditions can bring life on earth to an end. Should there be a deviation in the earth's rotation around its own axis or around the sun, or should for any other reason the surface temperature vary either up or down, or should she no longer be enveloped in a gaseous protective mantle which serves as temperature regulator, then she will again be without the life which thrives on her now.

In this he was half a century ahead of his time.

He hated nationalism, perhaps in part because he and his beloved native Alsace were caught between the hammer of Germany and the anvil of France. Born as a German in 1875, since five years earlier Germany had grabbed Alsace in war, he was interned as an enemy alien in southern France in 1917. This followed his deportation from his hospital in French Equatorial Africa, where he had saved lives irrespective of nationality or race. "I am in complete disagreement with the spirit of our age, because it is filled with contempt for thought," he wrote in his 1933 autobiography, published after Adolf Hitler came to power. He vowed never to step on German soil while the Nazis were in charge. At the same time, he never expressed the slightest sympathy for communism.

After World War II he fiercely opposed the development of nuclear weapons, issued his own celebrated "declaration of conscience" against them, and played a part in securing the first nuclear test–ban treaty, signed by the United States and the Soviet Union in 1963. He would have been instinctively against globalization, extolling the community feeling of a village, in Africa and elsewhere.

Yet his legacy, which faced mounting mockery even in his lifetime, is fraught. Broadly speaking, he is charged with two main failings.

First, his achievements as a medical man and as the founder of the hospital that still carries his name have been belittled—and were questioned when he was still alive. Indeed, within a decade of his death in 1965, his hospital almost foundered and has since suffered a number of nearly fatal wobbles.

Second, more controversially, his attitude toward Africans, even allowing for the fact that it was formed out of experience more than a century ago, is nowadays considered shockingly, outlandishly racist. Were he alive today, he would surely be "canceled" across a range of platforms.

Take the first of those charges. Even in Schweitzer's lifetime his achievements as a medical man aroused a measure of disdain—as well as admiration—from fellow doctors who visited Lambaréné. It was, wrote one of them, "not a hospital but a place for people to stay when they needed medical attention." By various accounts, it was fantastically unhygienic. Animals—pelicans and antelopes, pigs and monkeys, even a gorilla—would wander through the hospital grounds and sometimes even into the wards in the midst of operations, which the villagers would happily watch through the mesh wire that served as windows.

He seemed to oppose modernity. He dismissed evidence that solar topees, which he insisted that his European staff should wear, were pointless. He refused to buy a motorboat, preferring the slower motion of the canoe's rhythmic paddle. There was no telephone, no running water, and no electricity, apart from a generator that served the operating theater. A sewer ran down a gap between the buildings, clogged with soiled bandages and other detritus.

The European nurses and doctors used pit latrines, while the Africans used the nearby forest. Some visitors reported a general stench. Others said the wooden walls were painted black to hide the dirt. The wife of a French film director wrote in 1962 that "the Schweitzer hospital must be regarded as a sore, a cesspool, connected as it is with typical racist theories."

James Cameron, visiting in the 1960s, remarked on the "glaring squalor":

> The doctor had fenced off all mechanical advance to a degree that seemed both pedantic and appalling. The rude huts were airless and dark, plank beds and wooden pillows.… It was deliberately archaic and primitive, deliberately part of the jungle around it, a background of his own creation which clearly meant a great deal more philosophically than it did medically.

Another commentator described it as "a chaotic and artificially preserved medical slum."

Fifteen years or so after his death a new, modern, much bigger hospital was built up the hill, under the auspices of a foundation whose headquarters are still in Schweitzer's native region of Alsace. Here too his legacy has turned out to be sadly mixed. Schweitzer never trained locals to become doctors. Nearly all his nurses were white women, mainly from Austria, France, Germany, and Switzerland. His own wife and later his daughter, both of whom he was sometimes accused of treating harshly, were crucial to the hospital's administration. After his death, by which time Gabon had become independent, calls for locals to take control of institutions formerly run by the French colonials extended to the Schweitzer regime. The Gabonization of Schweitzer's hospital, which the doctor would certainly have opposed, has been a rocky ride.

After Schweitzer's death his foundation continued to pay for capital costs, projects, and equipment, but, once a completely new hospital was built farther up the hill, the Gabonese state was supposed to pay for salaries and running costs, which began to be paid increasingly late. Money began to go astray. Things came to a head six years ago when the mainly Gabonese staff revolted against a French director who sought to stamp out the false accounting of salaries, late payments, embezzlement, and bogus overtime claims. They carried

a coffin with his name on it around the hospital grounds, demanding his expulsion. He was forced out of the country amid accusations of racism. Some of his white colleagues were briefly imprisoned. The foundation in Alsace feared that the hospital might have to close.

An awkward twist to the tale was the acrimony that arose between some of the Europeans in the foundation, who were generally keen to keep control of it, and some of its American backers, who were keener that the local Gabonese should take over. "You think I'm a racist," the French director subjected to the mock coffin is said to have told an indignant American rival on the board. "But you're naïve. Nothing in Africa gets done unless white people do it."

The old guard in Strasbourg, which still oversees the main foundation, seemed loath to trust the local Gabonese to be honest or efficient. With Schweitzer dead, it became harder to raise funds abroad. Since 1981, the new hospital has had no fewer than twenty directors: some retired in despair, others were squeezed out. Those who hoped that it would be a beacon of multiracial harmony have been confounded: the white doctors and nurses and their successors who staffed it have almost all left, many of them bemoaning a perceived drop in standards. During the celebrations in 2013 to mark the centenary of Schweitzer's arrival at Lambaréné, Gabon's current president, Ali Bongo, had to pacify the feuding Europeans, Americans, and Gabonese. Not much feeling of reverence for life there.

The current director, Jules Mickala, a Gabonese colonel from the health branch of the ministry of defense, says cagily that the hospital gets by ("*On se débrouille*"). But he laments that, while the state electricity supply is liable to power cuts, the hospital's backup generator has been broken for "some months." He denies, however, that salaries are still being paid months late, as some of his staff contend. A retired nurse who remembers Schweitzer says sadly that the hospital is run by *fonctionnaires*. "The old spirit of Schweitzer has vanished," she says. "In those days we worked for love. Now people work only for money."

The "Village Lumière," which Schweitzer built for lepers, has only three of the afflicted still living there, since modern treatments have virtually eradicated the disease. But what is left is a slum for ill-paid workers living in tiny windowless stalls. A single tap beside the rutted road seems to service the entire village.

Still, it would be wrong to cast Schweitzer's medical legacy in an entirely gloomy light. For one thing, the hospital's mere survival can be marked down as a triumph. Its staff of 200-plus handles 30,000 patient visits a year. It is the most popular hospital for many miles around. Starting from scratch and building many of the original wards and the dispensary with his and his helpers' bare hands, Schweitzer created a hospital and a community that has served the people and saved thousands of lives for more than a century.

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Moreover, it depended entirely on the funds that Schweitzer raised, thanks to his travels across Europe and the United States, where his organ recitals and speeches drew vast crowds of supporters and financial contributors. Since Schweitzer's death, several thousand "Schweitzer fellows" from America, idealistic young volunteers, have continued to do valuable stints of service in the hospital. The British-based Reverence for Life charity, inspired by Schweitzer, runs projects to help the poor in Haiti, India, and Tanzania, among other places.

In medical terms, the most successful offshoot of the Schweitzer enterprise is the Centre for Medical Research at Lambaréné, known by its French initials, CERMEL, which is located on the grounds of the hospital but independently administered. Funded by the European Union and the German government, among others, its staff of around two hundred has helped recent advances toward a malaria vaccine.

Moreover, Schweitzer's hostility to modernity, especially in medicine, has been exaggerated. His objection was largely practical: hand tools would last longer than electric ones. A motorized supply of piped water, he reckoned at first, would break down. Schweitzer let the families of the sick come and live with them, cooking their own food and sleeping alongside them in contravention of modern medical norms, because he thought the ailing would otherwise not come at all.

It may all have been basic, but it achieved the doctor's chief aim, which was to reduce the physical and mental pain of patients who came from far and wide as his fame grew. Nobody was ever turned away because he or she could not pay.

It is Schweitzer's well-documented racial views that many contemporary commentators find hard to take, even with the passage of time. *On the Edge of the Primeval Forest* pulls no punches in judgment of the locals. The most famous passage, which

long ago acquired notoriety, is worth recording in full, since it was clearly no casual throwaway thought. Indeed, when the book was reprinted several times again during the next several decades, including in the run-up to Gabon's independence, he left it untouched, suggesting he still held the same view:

> A word in conclusion about the relations between the whites and the blacks. What must be the general character of the intercourse between them? Am I to treat the black man as my equal or my inferior? I must show him that I can respect the dignity of the human personality in every one, and this attitude in me he must be able to see for himself; but the essential thing is that there should be a real feeling of brotherliness. How far this is to find complete expression in the sayings and doings of daily life must be settled by circumstances. The negro is a child, and with children nothing can be done without the use of authority. We must therefore so arrange the circumstances of daily life that my natural authority can find expression. With regard to the negroes, then, I have coined the formula: "I am your brother, it is true, but your elder brother."

Schweitzer also repeatedly refers to the African as "a child of nature," explaining that his refusal to undertake regular rather than casual work gives him an enviable kind of freedom. Yet Schweitzer seems to accept that an element of compulsion is legitimate in order to make Africans more productive. Nor, though the doctor lists a desire to atone for the dreadful sins of the white man in Africa, does he appear to oppose colonialism itself. "The wealth of the country cannot be exploited because the native has so slight an interest in the process. How to train him to work? How to compel him?" A Gabonese lawyer, Augustin Émane, who wrote a groundbreaking book on Schweitzer, notes his "strange neutrality with regard to forced labor": the doctor seemed to think it was "not false in principle but difficult to achieve in practice."

In striving to build the hospital, his frustration sometimes boiled over. He is reported by various sources to have occasionally hit his workers for perceived laziness. Cameron describes the doctor goading his workers, whom he habitually called "*mes sauvages, mes primitifs,*" to build the lepers' village:

> It was with a striking absence of the routine saintliness and loving-kindness that the doctor spurred his indigènes to work, abused and upbraided them for their reluctance and indolence. He stumped around the more slothful sections in his vast soft black boots, projecting his great menacing mustache. "*Marche! Depèche-toi!*" he shouted. "*Fais ton devoir, sans discuter!*" And the Africans would break momentarily into a semblance of movement. "*Toi!–cours! Travaille comme un blanc, quoi!*" ["Get on! Hurry up! Do your job, no talking! You–run! Work like a white man, okay?"]

Even James Brabazon, the most authoritative of the doctor's many biographers, who is overwhelmingly sympathetic, admits "he was constantly shouting at [his African workers], he was calling them monkeys, and very occasionally he was hitting them." A nurse who was instrumental in founding the leper village in the 1950s explained that no one should judge Schweitzer for such excesses who had not worked at Lambaréné for at least six months, such were the frustrations that drove the most patient idealist to despair. "If anyone who worked there for any length of time tells you that they never struck a native, they're lying," she said, admitting she once hit an African man for telling Schweitzer lies about her work.

In a second memoir, *Histories of the Virgin Forest*, published in 1941, he robustly justifies the white man for saving Africans from inter-ethnic massacres:

> When the indigenous people express their discontent for being dominated by the whites, I tell them that without us they would no longer exist, since they would have killed each other off or would have ended up in the cooking-pot of the Pahouins [also known as the Fang, a leading Gabonese tribe]. They cannot rebut this argument. In general, despite the mischief for which the whites are guilty in their work of colonisation everywhere, they can however assert that they have brought peace to conquered peoples.

Schweitzer never learned to speak to the locals in their own languages, though he was said by loyalists to understand at least one of them. While he relied heavily on a trusted orderly called Joseph Azowani, he made little effort to train locals to a higher level. He tells a jaundiced tale of an educated local who was asked to help with some physical labor but declined, explaining that "intellectuals don't collect wood." Schweitzer said that no Gabonese doctors worked in his hospital because none had volunteered, preferring the better pay and bright lights of Libreville, the faraway capital.

He regarded Gabon's coming independence with a baleful, even bitter eye. He declared bluntly that it was ridiculous to give the vote to illiterates and that the Gabonese were entirely unready for self-government. "They destroy most things they touch," Schweitzer told Cameron, a few years before he died:

> How many of those who speak savagely and bitterly about the African came out here full of idealism, and have been crushed into weariness and hopelessness by the contest? You ask me whether the indigène can ever develop to responsibility without us and the answer is No, he cannot…. The United Nations Trusteeship Commissions and so forth… Do they ask who plants the trees so that the African can eat, who bores the wells so that he can drink?… Democracy is meaningless to children.

He also incurred the wrath of liberal opinion by siding with the Congolese province of Katanga when it tried to secede from the newly fledged independent Congo in 1960. When his friend Bertrand Russell scolded him for this, Schweitzer riposted that Katanga's government was efficient and hard-working, whereas Congo's central one under Patrice Lumumba (soon to be murdered with the CIA's complicity) was corrupt and inefficient: "Please forgive me for not being able to agree with you, because I know the facts."

It was this, among other things, that prompted Conor Cruise O'Brien, who served as a United Nations peace envoy to the region, to condemn Schweitzer virulently in 1964 as "a tragic anachronism" representing "to educated Africans and Afro-Americans…the most irritating, if not the most noxious,

aspects of the white man in Africa: paternalism, condescension, resistance to change." O'Brien cites a Ghanaian scholar arguing that "in his famous 'respect for life' Schweitzer tends to equate African Negroes [sic] with insects, as two inferior forms of life which must nonetheless be 'respected,' since *all* life is sacred."

Perhaps the nadir of Schweitzer's racial standpoint was his apparent endorsement, in conversation with Cameron, of apartheid:

> The most salutary influence on the race question had been the late Dr. [Daniel] Malan; that he had never in forty years taken an African to his table; and that indeed in no circumstances could he contemplate even the possibility of an *indigène* being seated in his presence. There was at the time the baffling suspicion that he was pulling my leg; only later I knew he was not.

Malan was the prime minister of South Africa who in 1948 had enacted the system of apartheid.

It is hard to excuse, let alone justify, many of Schweitzer's attitudes towards Africans, even allowing for the passage of time. For sure, he records his first impressions in 1913 with searing honesty and eminent sympathy for the plight of the locals. But more striking and less understandable is his evident refusal, half a century later, to accept that they could change with time and education.

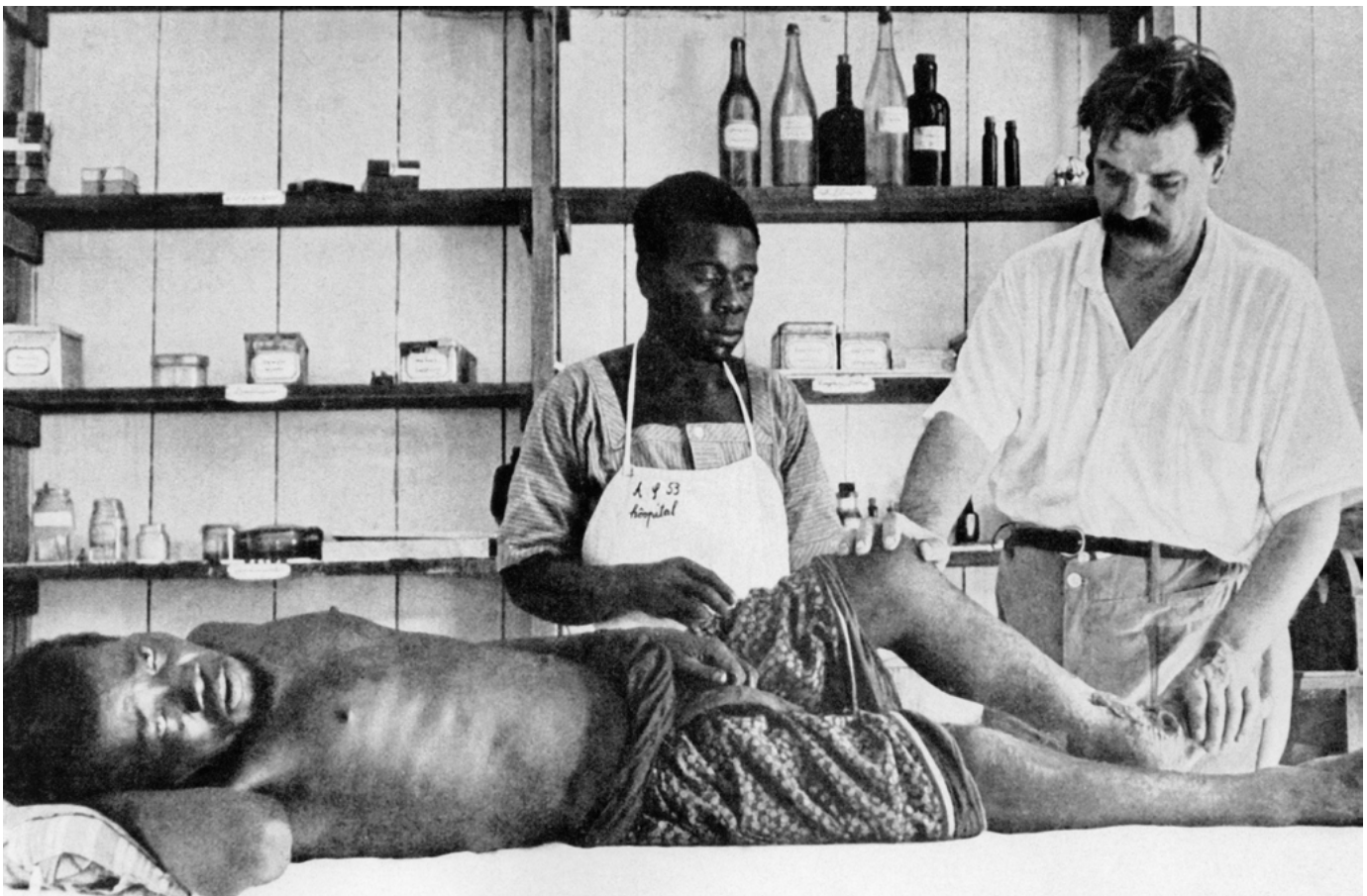
It is hard to excuse, let alone justify, many of Schweitzer's attitudes towards Africans, even allowing for the passage of time.

Aficionados of Schweitzer are unsurprisingly twitchy about acknowledging his racial attitudes, fearing that they unfairly cast a stain over his extraordinary overall achievements. "We are going through a process of trying to come to terms with it," says a leading light in the Reverence for Life movement. "He was a man of his time who used the language of his time."

Schweitzer's prime reason for coming as a doctor to Africa should be remembered as well. "Who can describe the injustice and the cruelties that in the course of centuries they [the Black Africans] have suffered at the hands of Europeans?" Though he did not specify the genocide of the Herero people by his fellow Germans in 1905 in South West Africa (later Namibia), he plainly regarded it with horror.

Although Schweitzer's language is paternalistic in the extreme, he admired the local Africans' psychological insights.

Albert Schweitzer with a patient in the hospital in Lambaréné



SUEDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG PHOTO/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

> Conversations I have had in the hospital with old natives about the ultimate things of life have deeply impressed me. The distinction between white and coloured, educated and uneducated, disappears when one gets talking with the forest dweller about our relations to each other, to mankind, to the universe and to the infinite.... On the whole I feel that the primitive man is much more good-natured than we Europeans are; with Christianity added to his good qualities, wonderfully noble characters can result. I expect I am not the only white man who feels himself put to shame by the natives.

He once said, "Nowhere but in Africa could I have discovered the idea of Reverence for all Life."

While Schweitzer refers often to the enmity between Gabon's different tribes, he notes how the locals were aghast at the scale of the Europeans' slaughter of each other in the first world war. Moreover, despite his calling as a pastor, Schweitzer was wary of imposing European cultural values on the locals. A visiting doctor in 1961 recalled "a lively discussion at the dinner table with his statement that only those who, through their own action and behavior, were able to convey the very best of Christian civilization to the Africans, had any justification in trying to influence their way of life." It is notable that, though Schweitzer held regular services, preaching the gospels through interpreters, there is no church within the grounds of the village or hospital. He never sought to dissuade the locals from polygamy.

Admirers of Schweitzer are habitually incensed by what they see as the tendency of his detractors to call out the comments and thoughts that cast him in a bad light, while skating over his overall achievements. "The idea that he was a racist really rubs me the wrong way," says an American doctor whose grandfather was a close colleague of Schweitzer's. Confessing to a naïve idealism when she first visited Lambaréné, she points to the enduring differences in cultures: "We do function in a different way." Is that a racist observation? "You can take a phrase and go in any direction with it and cherry-pick his faults," says a leading scientist at CERMEL.

Much of his rudeness to the local Africans can be put down not to racist malice but to his autocratic and volatile temperament amid the severe frustrations of trying to build a village and a hospital from scratch, not to mention the climate—the boiling heat, the sudden torrents of tropical rain, the mosquitoes. The Africans, Brabazon noted, often yelled back at him. He was also short-tempered and rude to white people. In his fiery youth, it is recorded, he struck his sister and hit a nephew. Once, in Lambaréné "he hit one of his nurses a considerable whack with a pick handle" for disobedience. "Schweitzer had no time for politeness," wrote Brabazon. "I hate good manners," Schweitzer once said.

The accusations lodged by Cameron, one of the most brilliant foreign correspondents of his day, deserve special attention, for his essay is among the most damaging to Schweitzer's reputation. Though the anecdotes and exchanges illustrated some of Schweitzer's less attractive features, they should also be seen through the prism of a liberal anti-imperialist jarring against an old man who had made a habit of swiping at anything that smacked of fashionable virtue-signaling. Besides, Schweitzer was a tease who liked to shock liberal opinion-makers, often with a wink.

Take his disparaging comment that Cameron records him making about Gandhi, for whom the journalist had a special regard. After Cameron mentioned that Gandhi had taught him how to eat a mango, Schweitzer said: "There was the classic tragedy. Gandhi was killed in the end by the very forces of the past he had spent his life trying to evoke. A great educator, misled into politics." Yet Schweitzer deeply respected the Hindu basis of Gandhi's beliefs and had written copiously about them. His curt remark was probably prompted by a desire to rile up the younger man.

The silly dig at politics was revealing, however. Schweitzer had little time for formal politics; he tended to mock high-flown international rhetoric and to look warily at organizations such as the United Nations, though he had mutually respectful exchanges with Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld. Schweitzer could be naïve, too, when compelled to engage in worldly affairs—for instance, when he was persuaded to endorse East German propaganda as part of his campaign against nuclear weapons.

Cameron's anti-colonial credentials may have provoked in Schweitzer an adversarial desire to raise his hackles. The doctor's notorious comments about Malan may fall under a similar rubric, for Schweitzer was known on other occasions to have fiercely condemned apartheid. Yet at the same time he plainly thought that hurriedly granting self-government to Africans, a process then in train across the continent, was unwise; indeed, he thought it "morally indefensible to leave Africans in the lurch," as one of his modern defenders puts it.

As for telling Cameron that he had never sat at a table with a Black man, this, in Brabazon's words, was "totally at variance with the facts," since "Africans sat, lay, and sprawled in Schweitzer's presence all the time." Still, Brabazon himself seems to labor his explanation for the doctor's refusal to eat with his Black staff in a more formal setting: for one thing, "it was a matter of hierarchy and discipline"; for another, the Africans "refused to eat from any pot but their own—a refusal that had its origin in fear of poisoning but had become an unbreakable social custom." But when African officials came to the hospital as visitors they *did* eat in the staff dining room like any other guest. Schweitzer exaggerated. Cameron took him too literally.

Whereas it is generally white commentators who are most strident in denouncing Schweitzer for racism, it seems that Africans with a link to Lambaréné express a more nuanced view. Surely, in the first flush of postcolonial indignation, educated Africans tended to be damning in their assessment. Aristide Mba, a Gabonese academic now in America, calls him "a joke." Others have deemed him "an anachronism." A senior figure of color at the World Bank recently judged him "a racist who took bad care of his patients."

But others sound more tolerant. The late Ali Mazrui, a Kenya-born scholar of Swahili descent noted for his pan-African views, was the Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities at the State University of New York at Binghamton. In accepting the chair, he made subtle distinctions between three different types of racism: "*malignant racism* (racial hostility or contempt for others), *benign racism* (racial ethnocentrism without aggression) and *benevolent racism* (racial paternalism and altruistic ethnocentrism)." Schweitzer, he reckoned, was a racist of the benevolent kind.

In *Docteur Schweitzer, une Icône Africaine*, Augustin Émane, who was born at Lambaréné and now teaches labor law at Nantes University in France, quotes a number of Africans who knew the doctor. Their overriding judgment is that Schweitzer was a disciplinarian who asserted his superior status but nonetheless respected them as people. "Of course we were very critical of Schweitzer as a colonialist, a racist," says Émane of his days as a young man born soon after independence. "But when I took a real interest in his life and talked to people who knew him, my opinion changed a bit.… He was a just man." Regarding the notorious "African as younger brother" phrase, Émane says that in colonial times few whites would accept the "brother" epithet at all, however qualified. "Brother," by the standard of the era, was progressive.

Quite often Émane's witnesses recall how Schweitzer was "feared," especially when he was in a bad temper. An old woman who remembers him from when she was a girl says you were expected to look humbly at the ground when he spoke. Several of Émane's sources mention that he sometimes "slapped" his staff ("*Parfois il a usé de la gifle*") but add that, once the doctor's anger had subsided, laughter would resume. "Respect" is a word that crops up repeatedly. Most Africans with links to Lambaréné insist he respected the local people, even amid bursts of anger, frustration, and abuse.

Maman Sophie, a famous figure in Lambaréné, speaks in grateful awe of Schweitzer's achievements as founder of the hospital where she worked for thirty-four years. "He respected everyone—animals, children, all human beings." She airily dismisses the charge of racism. "You must know that in those days there were no *évolués*," meaning educated Africans who had assimilated with whites.

Another phrase that echoed repeatedly during a recent visit to Lambaréné was that "he was a man of his time" ("*Un homme de l'époque*"). Not a single local Gabonese said bluntly, "He was a racist," preferring to use euphemisms, often expressed with a smile. Most of the people who had personal links with Lambaréné expressed pride in their association with "*Le Grand Docteur,*" as he was invariably addressed. "*L'esprit de Shezzair,*" as locals pronounce his name, was frequently intoned, always with reverence. "Reverence for Life" was often mentioned, as if it gave Lambaréné a special cachet.

"He was like a God," says Praxedt Ndolo, daughter of Joseph Azowani, Schweitzer's longest serving medical orderly, the Black man with whom he probably had the closest relationship. Incidentally, Ndolo went out of her way to explain why her father was not buried alongside Schweitzer: he preferred interment in his own village of birth. It has been suggested that there was racial segregation even in the little cemetery where Schweitzer and a dozen of his closest companions now lie, in graves marked by modest little wooden crosses: indeed, all those buried are white.

Not a single local Gabonese said bluntly, "He was a racist," preferring to use euphemisms, often expressed with a smile.

Mickala, the hospital's current director, sounds irritated by the racist tag. "Of course he was not a racist: he came here to do good, he looked after everyone, he worked for the love of the people here, he died here. He didn't look at the color of their skin or at their religion—all were equal."

Gabon's current president, Ali Bongo, once told a visiting professor from America how, when he traveled abroad as a young man, almost no one had heard of Gabon, "but everyone had heard of Lambaréné and Albert Schweitzer—he put our country on the map." In 2013 he led the way in celebrating the centenary of Schweitzer's arrival. "*Grand Docteur*," he declared, "you have not left us, you will not leave us! I am certain that your memory and the spirit you inspired will not perish and that your life's work and brotherliness will live on in the Gabon of tomorrow." Even more strikingly, seeing that Schweitzer had openly doubted the wisdom of granting Gabon independence, the country's first president, Léon M'ba, who considered himself a close friend of Schweitzer, asked him to represent France's African states at the United Nations Commission on the Rights of Man.

Was Schweitzer a racist? Even his most devoted followers find it hard to deny that some of his attitudes—even allowing for historical context—cannot be called anything else. Can a racist also be a virtuous and great man? Nowadays many would say that that is impossible. But most of the good people of Lambaréné evidently beg to differ.

XAN SMILEY *is editor at large for the* Economist.

The Blood Libel

Steven Englund

How do we understand 'ritual murder'?

Nothing in the long and tragic history of Catholic anti-Jewish action rivals the blood libel for shock, horror, and folly. The sudden disappearance of a Christian child in a small rural Central or Eastern European town is met, unexpectedly, by an outburst of accusations by local Christians against their Jewish neighbors. Good men and women who have lived peacefully for decades suddenly hear themselves accused of abducting and murdering a small child for the purpose of religious sacrifice. The blood libel has been around since the twelfth century, fostering in Christians the feeling that they are once again the victims of Jews, hence justified in defending themselves, their faith, and their children against the ancient enemy.

In truth, ritual-murder accusations took hold only rarely: fewer than a hundred noteworthy cases in a millennium. And such charges almost invariably provoked some degree of disbelief among the educated and those in authority, as well as refutations from the learned—Christian or Jewish. Formal investigations and trials were authorized despite ambivalence and reluctance on the part of doubtful officials. Indeed, the case that proved to be the "big bang" of blood-libel notoriety involves Simon of Trent (1475), which exploded into high visibility mainly because secular and religious authority was united in the hands of a powerful prince-bishop who found it politically expedient to pursue this case. He did this so efficiently that Rome felt obliged to acquiesce: Simon was eventually canonized, while books about "the martyr" were still being churned out more than four centuries later in justification of the blood libel.

Tendentious books of blood libel went uncondemned by the magisterium, transforming fake news into established tradition, a long "memory trail." Those in search of a pretext could always find phony documentation to justify their chimerical beliefs about Jews. "This long story of the persistence of anti-Jewish blood libels despite arguments to the contrary is dispiriting," concludes Magda Teter in *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth*, a long-awaited study of ritual-murder accusations. Teter, a professor at Fordham University, shows that the "great" medieval cases of William of Norwich (1144) or "Little Hugh" of Lincoln (1255) took on celebrity status only centuries later in the sinister retroactive light shed by Simon of Trent. Teter also shows that the blood libel, even as it arose in very Catholic Poland, did not turn on matters theological (e.g. the Crucifixion) but consisted of vitriolic efforts to brand Jews as criminals or perpetrators of anti-Christian cruelties in order to impede their social interaction with Christians. (The attempts did not always work: in Eastern Europe, as in Central or Western Europe, Jews and gentiles got along well for the most part.)

If the Reformation and Enlightenment largely put the kibosh on German, French, and British blood-libel charges, the Counter-Reformation gave the lie new life as a popular discourse in Poland–Lithuania. A report prepared by Cardinal Ganganelli (the future Pope Clement XIV) in 1758 concluded that ritual murder was a calumny void of truth, but this text lay buried in the archives for more than a century. It was printed for the first time around 1900 because the blood libel, having receded from visibility for three centuries, underwent a stunning revival in five shocking cases. Teter does not include Tiszaeszlár (1882–3, Hungary), Xanten and Konitz (1891–3 and 1900, respectively, both Germany), Hilsener (1899–1900, the Czech lands), and Beilis (1913, Russia) in her study, though she does have a postscript on them. They are covered with great detail in another recent book: *Blood Inscriptions: Science, Modernity, and Ritual Murder at Europe's Fin de Siècle* by Hillel J. Kieval, a professor at Washington University.

Teter and Kievel are both accomplished and respected scholars, yet in critical points of method, interpretation, and understanding, they sharply differ in their approach to the topic—a reminder, if one were needed, that history is always as much an art as a science. Had Teter chosen to "finish the story" with a hundred pages of analysis of the modern cases, one suspects she would have turned out a study very different from Kieval's.

Teter's is a sweeping work of *longue durée*, from the mid-twelfth to the late eighteenth century throughout Europe. While much changes, the continuities prevail over the discontinuities. Her book is, most importantly, a study where *religion* is the final reference point, notwithstanding numerous learned peregrinations into the adjacent terrains of society,

Plate by Paul Lacroix illustrating blood libel, published in London 1874

THE PROTECTED ART ARCHIVE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

economy, and politics. For Teter, the ritual-murder accusation has a clear and stable identity from its earliest appearance to its most recent. In fundamental ways, the Beilis case in 1913 rehearses the William of Norwich case in 1144, thanks to nearly eight centuries of Christian anti-Jewish discrimination, persecution, and contempt in sermons, rites, policies, and public sentiment.

Kieval, on the other hand, has produced a micro-history focusing on five locales in Central Europe over thirty years. In his telling, modern ritual murder is a new phenomenon that relates only nominally to the earlier cases Teter focuses on. In this, Kieval follows the prevailing scholarly view, according to which "antisemitism" constitutes a thorough-going departure from religious

Those in search of a pretext could always find phony documentation to justify their chimerical beliefs about Jews.

anti-Judaism. Kieval's conclusions about the novelty of latter-day ritual murders are anchored in his analysis of his subjects' distinctively modern epistemology, which embraced the secular languages of forensic science, politics, and "breaking news" journalism. In other words, their understanding did not turn on theology, and they were not concerned with the religious symbolism of the alleged crimes: Jesus was no longer being "crucified." Instead, the modern version of the blood libel accused kosher butchers of slicing up Christian children for no particular reason beyond, in Kieval's pungent words, "raw brutality.... [S]acrifice has been transmuted into slaughter, the altar into the cutting block.... The Jews, themselves, finally, are not religious adversaries, the vanquished recipients of the Old Law; they are Yids."

"This is not a book about the tenacity of myth and superstition in the modern world," Kieval writes. He posits no "cultural backwardness" or "atavism" in the antisemites he studies. They were not seduced by some "irrational element in the blood libel"; there was no breakdown of Enlightenment understanding. In short, he finds no "regrettable continuity between the medieval accusation and its modern variant." He concedes that he had once thought differently, believing that modern antisemitism represented an explosion of "irrationality in the Weberian age of disenchantment." But no longer: immersion in the language of officials, police, lawyers, doctors, and experts disabused Kieval of this idea, for they all viewed events through modern glasses and understood them through modern scientific categories. The "*modern* trial for ritual murder" has "unique features," he writes, and constitutes not only "*a new phenomenon* in the long history of the blood libel [but] a new chapter in Jewish-state relations."

Kieval's accounts of the five stories of modern ritual murder do not unfold quite as smoothly as we might expect. At every stage of every trial in Hungary, Germany, or Bohemia, premodern language—explicit or vague charges of ritual murder—swirled and eddied throughout the town, as locals not previously known to be Jew-haters took up the cry that a Jewish neighbor had abducted a young Christian for his or her blood. Kieval calls this the "disreputable" language of tradition; it cascaded throughout the ensuing trial and media circus and ran up against the more "reputable" language of science. Indeed, hoary tradition often got the jump on modernity, appropriating legal and forensic developments to its own ends.

The drawn-out "affairs" Kieval writes about could last for as long as two years, occasioning large riots, extensive property destruction (including to synagogues), and harm to people. These episodes often required authorities to dispatch substantial army units to restore and maintain order. Kieval's book makes for a tense reading experience, as we wonder whether rational idioms and rules of expression will finally prevail in the great battle for control of interpretation. Frequently, they do not. Discussing Konitz, for example, Kieval remarks on the amount of time that members of the prosecution were "misguided—led astray by explicit and implicit bias, rumor, the power of suggestion." As time passed, "the legal and scientific discourse of Jewish ritual murder became increasingly 'illegible,' even as anti-Jewish emotions appeared to be gaining in strength."

Kieval's intricate picture of a "naturalized" blood libel, stripped of all obvious religious symbolism, is brilliantly rendered and important. The high faith of 1200 and the low superstitions of 1890 took very different forms, and Kieval is right to insist on the importance of the changes. On the other hand, most aspects of human life—from science and statecraft to law and sewage disposal—changed radically between 1200 and 1890. Yet it is another question whether these changes transformed them into different things entirely. Ancient sacraments are still holy; Good Friday today is still closer to the original day of the Crucifixion than to any midsummer's day, as Charles Taylor notes in *A Secular Age*. So, is Kieval right that no "continuity [exists] between the medieval accusation and its modern variant"?

Scholars pore over the medieval origins of the modern state and nation. So why do recent generations of historians of modern antisemitism dispute the relevance of a "deep" past (as a previous generation of scholars, from Baron to Katz to Yerushalmi, did not)? It is difficult to find another area of scholarship where historians, of all people, proceed by burying the significance of the past rather than exhuming it. The impulse to reduce modern antisemitism to its racial, economic, social, and political factors may, in truth, be inseparable from the impulse to lay out a *new* academic field for cultivation, a field distinct from the endless forests of anti-Judaism in theology, literature, philosophy, folklore, and you-name-it. It has the appeal of offering a "specialty," permitting archival mastery of a fathomable subject. One can thus study examples of anti-Jewish behavior in a given place during a limited period—*and keep it there*. The practitioner is freed from having to juggle many balls at once.

The reticence to adduce deep historical causes for modern antisemitism may be due in part to the sticky matter of religion. That subject is just too old-fashioned and complicated: religion's busy afterlife in unbelieving ages, the varieties of so-called secular religions, etc. Even the most desultory inspection reveals to the unsuspecting contemporist that what he had dismissed as a monolith—defunct orthodox religion—is actually a moving kaleidoscope of shifting forms, very much affecting "secular" ages. Whatever his reasons, Kieval staunchly walls off modern ritual murder and the antisemitism that embraced it from "eternal anti-Judaism." By doing so, he takes the antisemites at their word when they deny religious motivation and insist on "purely secular" reasons for their persecution of Jews—this despite the fact that he warns his fellow historians against an uncritical acceptance of sources.

After fifteen years of studying "modern" antisemitism, I have concluded that nothing is more definitive of antisemitism than the false claim that it is free of religion. Not recognizing this is akin to accepting the argument "but many of

my friends are Jewish…" For the historian to look away from religion because he deems it old hat is to fail to see the subtle ways in which religion suffuses antisemitism in general and charges of ritual murder in particular.

Historians are like film editors; the best of them leave a lot of the actual footage on the cutting-room floor. What Kieval minimizes in favor of "scalpels, micrometers, microscopes, and the scientific prestige they wielded" is the common fare of most histories of these five episodes (and there are many)—to wit, the cascades of accusations that ritual murder is "ordained" in the Hebrew scriptures. To sift the era's press reports and commentaries, and not only the antisemitic ones, is to wander in a thicket of the kind of premodern language and assumptions that Kieval describes as "disreputable." There were clerics who knew better—for example, Rev. Stoecker, court preacher to the German Kaiser—but nevertheless purveyed the blood libel, and there were clerics who did not know better—for example, Josef Deckert, an Austrian priest who wrote books on the veracity of blood libel, from Simon of Trent to Hilsner. There were skeptical politicians such as Mayor Lueger of Vienna who disbelieved but transmitted the blood libel anyway; they were joined by racists and anticlericalists who hated religion but nodded in sage agreement with the "good Christians" in Konitz rioting against the "child killers." Is it any wonder that Ismar Schorsch, a respected historian of an earlier generation, laments that "medieval animosity toward Jews" was not dissipated but "sustained, transmuted and intensified"?

Those who propagated accusations of ritual murder at Xanten and elsewhere were not troglodytes; they used electricity and clocks, and knew the earth was round. But many—it is all but impossible to know their precise number—simultaneously believed in dark fantasies where the Jews were concerned. As for the cynical and opportunistic antisemites who knew these were fantasies, they arrived in town only after the *scandale* was launched, hoping to make political hay while the sun shone. The trials struggled to be modern stagings, but the fog of accusations, publicity, riots, and international debate turned the proceedings into prolonged "affairs," where the old "disreputable" language reasserted itself.

Ferreting out what a particular person actually believed is often impossible and irrelevant. Since the Trump presidency, we easily grasp that there can be a shocking symbiosis between cynicism and credulity. Some of the people Teter writes about were both credulous and doubtful. At the end of the day, establishing the blood libeler's true "position" is as complicated as brain surgery—more so, since, to date, no scholar has been able to explain why there was a three-hundred-year hiatus in these episodes or why the era of modern trials lasted only thirty years. Not even Teter establishes just how a largely uneducated populace made contact with the "memory trail" of written tradition that preserved and transmitted the blood libel.

In the absence of such a comprehensive account, historians do the best we can, accenting or downplaying this or that feature of each ritual-murder case. Scholars used to concentrate on the lurid, premodern religious aspects of these cases, but Kieval chooses a different path, offering elegantly written "thick descriptions" of the social and economic contexts of the five cases he investigates. He is formidable at laying out the questions, rumors, and innuendo that triggered a "successful" ritual murder allegation: the kinds of knife wounds and degree of exsanguination in the body, the proximity of Jews, the pointed animus of a few locals, etc. With such granular micro-history, Kieval clearly hopes to avoid one-dimensional arguments based on religion.

The details he gathers are indeed relevant and interesting, and no serious scholar would dispute that the blood libel and the violence it provoked were in part precipitated by the particulars of local political or personal conflict. It is gravely misleading, however, to suggest that charges of ritual murder can be understood mainly in terms of forensic, social, economic, and political conflict. Something else was going on, something that gave these cases their unique charge of emotion and irrationality. Historians cannot indulge in the luxury of the Skinnerian psychologist who focuses only on behavior, not the mind. We need to know something about why people in these places came to think as they did, and we cannot do that without examining the construction of their cultural identity.

So why the Jews? There is no simple answer. Many factors and levels of causation come into play in a blood-libel episode, but the attitudes and presuppositions of the actors are not unimportant. What was the origin of the longstanding social mentality that permitted someone at Tiszaeszlár to accuse a neighbor of a crime so heinous that no one would credit it for a moment if the alleged culprit were anyone but a Jew?

It is gravely misleading to suggest that charges of ritual murder can be understood mainly in terms of forensic, social, economic, and political conflict.

Obviously, a generalized "social imaginary" (or "anti-Judaism as tools for thought") such as that brilliantly excavated by David Nirenberg in *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* does not explain or even prepare us for the shocking outbreak of a ritual-murder accusation. Then again, a general theory of class conflict cannot account for the outbreak of revolution in Russia in 1917, either. But that doesn't mean that Karl Marx is irrelevant; it just means that the *preconditions* of events are not the same as their precipitants. The structures of social belief may nevertheless take explanatory precedence over the immediate triggers of ritual-murder cases. Longstanding biases about "the Jew" sneak in through the back door and affect behavior in ways that the accusers in these cases may not have been fully conscious of.

It is also crucial to note that the ancient force and ongoing presence of a religious mentality is not the same thing as formal religion—e.g. sermons attacking "Christ killers"—although there was plenty of that, including in the cases Kieval studies. Religion is the red thread connecting the ancient and the modern, from William of Norwich to Esther Solymosi of Tiszaeszlár.

It is a single mentality, variously developed and expressed. The people making the wild accusations of ritual murder while burning synagogues, desecrating Torahs, and attacking homes and individuals were not primarily arraigning Jews for their race, but for their alleged attachment to "diabolic" teachings in Judaism's holy scriptures. The battle line the accusers drew was most often between Jews and Christians, not between Jews and Aryans or Germans.

Many participants were driven by extreme emotions—fear, anxiety, hatred—that needed no encouragement from theology or the clergy. As the German scholar Christoph Nonn has shown, the accusers *wanted* the chimera of ritual murder to be true; they were motivated not just by self-interest but also by a will to believe, a will with roots in hope and fear. This will to believe was the blood libel's hidden strength, hard to pin down because it often went implied, and because those impelled by it did not leave records or give interviews attesting to it. That means that historians must often detect it indirectly. But if they overlook it, they miss something indispensable to a proper understanding of nineteenth-century blood-libel cases. These cases involved innumerable novelties and variations, as Kieval well documents. But for all their novelties, they were not an innovation—not an invented tradition, but a real one, stretching back many centuries. Jews had become the targets of many other kinds of accusation during all those years: social, economic, cultural, political, racial. But if ever proof were needed that the original and essentially religious charge of "devil" was still current, then the blood libel is it.

We tend to account for the recent upsurge of antisemitism in Western societies mainly in terms of global geopolitics and immigration trends. But explanations that restrict their view to Israeli–Palestinian relations or the presence of Muslim newcomers in wretched suburbs overlook another crucial factor: the complex meaning attached to the word "Jew" in Christian society.

That factor becomes clearer if we look at another episode in the same era as the ritual murder trials Kieval discusses. Timothy Verhoeven's book *Sexual Crime, Religion and Masculinity in fin-de-siècle France: The Flamidien Affair* (2018) recounts a straightforward case of pederastic homicide. A Lasallian brother named Flamidien in Lille was accused of murdering a twelve-year-old pupil to keep him from talking about Flamidien's sexual predations. The event amounts to a small fray in the ongoing clash between the French Republic and the Catholic Church; within a year it got swallowed up by the Dreyfus Affair. What is noteworthy about the episode is not the set-to between anticlericalism and Catholicism—a theme well known and studied—but rather that it never occurred to either side in this conflict to resort to medieval myths or apocalyptic calumnies. Indeed, the only moment of true craziness in this episode concerned the Jews, when a Catholic editor defending Flamidien speculated that a secret Jewish cabal was somehow behind the whole affair, taking revenge on the Church.

The kinds of accusations leveled at Jews would have been considered patently absurd had they been leveled at any other group. Only "the Jew" could be described as the origin of evil, the devil's creature, the enemy of the nations, the drinker of Christian blood. No amount of archival ferreting out of the racial, economic, social, political, or cultural contributors to antisemitism will explain away its abiding anti-Judaic dimension. Scholars may wish that modern antisemitism were a purely secular matter, detached from the foundations of its medieval forerunner; yet only the deep religious past can explain this curiously non-ideological, non-"scientific" idea of the Jews as a diabolical menace. One notes something peculiar about violently anticlerical, racist antisemites, the kind who insisted that race, not religion, is the key. They often followed this up with "the only way to fight 'the Jew' is with another, greater spiritual conviction," as Eugen Dühring put it. This is a wild contradiction unless we keep firmly in mind the underlying religious nature of Jew-hatred.

In sum, the secular doctrines and politics of the "new" antisemitism were by no means identical with the collective social understanding (the traditional anti-Judaism) on which they implicitly depended for their popular reception. How ritual-murder accusations were "heard" is a different matter from what the antisemites intended them to sound like. It was anti-Judaism's lingering presuppositions that allowed antisemitic ideology to penetrate so deeply into modern European societies. The result was usually more than anyone bargained for.

STEVEN ENGLUND *is a longtime* Commonweal *contributor who is writing a comparative history of anti-Judaism and antisemitism in Germany, Austria-Hungary, and France.*

Two Poems by David Lehman

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

Conventional Wisdom
is a great name
for a nation-wide magazine
as *Newsweek* proved
in its ad campaign, circa 1991,
which claimed it offered the opposite
of "conventional wisdom"
and inadvertently
proved opposites are equal.

POETICS

"Reading your poems," you said,
"One would hardly know
There's a pandemic going on."
"Yes," I said. "That's the point."

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

‘At the Crossroads of Migration’

An interview with Bishop Mark J. Seitz

John Gehring

Bishop Mark J. Seitz leads the Diocese of El Paso, Texas, on the U.S.–Mexico border. The diocese includes ten counties in far west Texas covering more than 20,000 square miles. Last month, Bishop Seitz met with President Biden during the president’s trip to El Paso. Commonweal *contributor John Gehring recently spoke with the bishop about that meeting and what leaders in Washington, who are thousands of miles away from the reality on the border, should know about migrants.*

JOHN GEHRING: When President Biden visited El Paso, you had a conversation with him in the presidential limousine. What did you tell him and how did he respond?

BISHOP SEITZ: El Paso is at the crossroads of migration. For us, it was important for the president to understand that we really can meet the challenges of migration in a way that’s true to our values, and can do it with compassion and dignity. It was a bit heady to be swept away by the Secret Service for a one-on-one talk with the president of the United States—who gets a chance like that? Our conversation was private. But he’s the president and I’m a bishop and when people are in confined spaces with a priest they tend to open up. So you can imagine that naturally we spoke about faith and how he himself understands this unique role he inhabits in this unique moment in history. I hope we can pick up the thread again. I also thought it was important for him to be in touch with the pain here at the border. You can’t make good policy if you don’t know the pain. I gave him a holy card of the Sacred Heart with a message from a little girl in Ciudad Juárez looking for a chance to reunite with family in the United States.

JG: President Biden has said that he doesn’t like Title 42, the controversial Trump-era policy that has led to the expulsion of migrants seeking asylum. In a recent announcement, the Biden administration said it would open more legal pathways to migrants, but at the same time expanded restrictive policies that will mean migrants from Nicaragua, Cuba, and Haiti will face immediate expulsion to Mexico if they cross the border illegally. The UN Refugee Agency said the restrictions are “not in line with refugee law standards.” Is the administration creating more insecurity and fear on the border?

BISHOP SEITZ: If he doesn’t like Title 42, it’s because he shouldn’t. The expansion of Title 42, put in place by the previous administration on the false pretense that immigrants bring disease, is unjustifiable. It is probably illegal, and I hope the Supreme Court will see it that way. But as a priest, I need to be clear: Title 42 and policies like it are merciless and are literally killing people by driving them to cross the desert and to drown in the river. Children are dying. Death can’t be an acceptable part of the overhead of our immigration policy. Have we become that numb? There are alternatives. But from

Bishop Mark J. Seitz walks with a young Honduran migrant at the Lerdo International Bridge in El Paso, June 2019.

CNS PHOTO/JOSE LUIS GONZALEZ, REUTERS

experience, I can tell you it won't be solved with policies that deny asylum to more people, or with walls, deportation, detention, or more money for immigration enforcement. Immigration is a long-term challenge that's only going to be solved with long-term thinking. We need to pivot to a more humanitarian approach that respects the rights and dignity of people who need to migrate. We need to promote sustainable development abroad so people don't have to migrate. But politicians can have a hard time seeing the big picture. So as a Catholic community, we're going to need to lead by our example, and our bishops' conference will keep pushing the president to make the moral case to the rest of the country that all of this is possible, is achievable, and is the right thing to do.

JG: While you were with President Biden at the airport in El Paso, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott handed the president a letter that accused the president of failing to enforce federal immigration laws and said he is promoting "open border policies." Meanwhile, the governor (who is Catholic) has been sending migrants from Texas to cities led by Democratic mayors. What do you make of the governor's approach, and have you had a chance to speak with him about the Church's position on these issues?

BISHOP SEITZ: I had a chance to greet Gov. Abbott when he came to El Paso. The bishops of Texas have been able to have a dialogue with him about the Gospel for years. I think the governor knows where we stand. I want to believe he's trying to find his way to the light, too. In my experience, the challenges of immigration and its causes and effects are so tangled that you can only begin to get to solutions when the federal government, the states, and local communities

are rowing in the same direction. We all know this is a broken system but local communities, our faith communities, and our Catholic agencies are largely picking up the pieces at the border. So whenever you put politics before collaboration, you aren't helping the cause. As we say in Texas, that dog won't hunt.

JG: Politicians in Washington are thousands of miles away from the lived reality you see on the border every day. When you talk to migrant families, what are you hearing from them, and what should political leaders know about their lives?

BISHOP SEITZ: People seem to think that those who are coming to our border are looking for a better life. That's true. But what I've also found is that a lot of people aren't just seeking a better life, but to be able to live at all. Especially women. There are too many women who come with physical, psychic, and spiritual wounds; it's a sad reflection on our lack of respect for women. They're fleeing desperate situations and looking for a shot to live with a little dignity. They just want to support their families, work, and be part of our communities. Through our Border Refugee Assistance Fund, we've been able to help women who've been through so much trauma. I can't tell you how humbling it is to witness their strength in adversity. It's a sin that Washington can't secure the protections of vulnerable people at the border, that we can't pass immigration reform, and, more broadly, that we continue to treat certain groups of people as disposable.

El Paso is a great example of how we have nothing to fear from migrants. If you only listened to politicians in Washington, you wouldn't know this, but one-quarter of our community was born abroad. We are more than 80 percent Mexican American. People here have been coming and going since before this country existed. And we're a beautiful, vibrant, and safe community for it. I feel like I'm the bishop of the best diocese in the country. Our parishes are filled with life and song and joy. We're better off for our diversity. It's certainly not without challenges, but the work of welcome is really transformative.

JG: You wear friendship bracelets on your wrists that were braided by girls housed at a shelter for unaccompanied minors who cross the U.S.–Mexican border. Can you share the story behind those bracelets?

BISHOP SEITZ: I found my way into the Church's social mission through the pro-life movement. For decades I wore a bracelet with the date of the *Roe v. Wade* decision, which I vowed to wear until it was rolled back. There's that Irish prayer, the Breastplate of Saint Patrick. It's about binding yourself to the Trinity. When you work with the poor, all these abstractions we hold about immigrants and poor people come crashing down. You see that these are just human beings, like you and me, with hopes, anxieties, dreams, and stories. They enter into your life and provide a grace that changes you. You become part of their story and they become part of yours. The Spirit weaves your lives together. As you grow older, the spiritual life becomes more and more about finding Jesus in the vulnerability of the people you meet and in your own vulnerability. That's where grace leaks through the crevices. It's what gives your life meaning and purpose. To steal an expression from the Church Father Maximus, it's in these moments that the "logos becomes thick." These bracelets are my vow to be faithful to the God I've met in those vulnerable spaces and to bind myself to those stories and to the Trinity.

JG: What are the Diocese of El Paso and other Catholic agencies in the area doing to help migrant families?

BISHOP SEITZ: We're being transformed by the Gospel. We're privileged to live the Paschal Mystery in this work in many ways: hospitality, legal services, standing with those who are expelled to Mexico, and standing with them for a more just and merciful and welcoming world. And it's not just Catholics. God has been pulling the whole community together in this—Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, the young and the old. In spite of the challenges, it's a hopeful ministry. People who migrate are people of tremendous hope; you don't migrate if you don't have hope that things are going to get better. And when you do this work, that hope—and faith—becomes infectious; it overtakes you and makes you a better person.

JG: Comprehensive immigration reform that would offer pathways to citizenship for migrants used to have some bipartisan support in Congress. That has not been the case for a while now. What happened and what will it take to revive that kind of legislation?

BISHOP SEITZ: Fundamentally, we need to stop running scared. There are smart, committed people in Washington, but on the whole, when it comes down to it, half our lawmakers are running scared from migration and the other half are peddling unfounded fears about immigrants. So there's a lot of fear. On a spiritual level, fear is poison. It makes you want to possess and master and be defensive. That's what you hear in rhetoric about sealing the border or in language that demonizes refugees. But fear blinds us to the reality that we might be transformed and freed for another sort of future—reconciliation, the Reign of God, a community that makes space for everyone. The Church has to work for immigration reform, but we can't ignore how dysfunctional and fear-driven our politics is right now. Some of that's cable TV and some of it is gerrymandering and other legal factors. But it's deeper than that. Never mind welcoming the stranger, we've become strangers to one another. That's an infirmity of the soul.

We have to figure out ways to open up paths of repentance and hope to get past this fear. And what I've taken away from

this exercise on synodality is that it can't just be the bishops, it has to be all of us. We all have to figure this out. We have to listen deeply to the Holy Spirit. The Resurrection gets rid of fear. More than proclaiming ideas, the Church nurtures, she gathers, she builds up the Reign of God by building a community of wide hospitality, showing that there really is grace and room for everyone. Once you've tasted that salvation, once you know that your life and the lives of everyone else are bound up with one another, then you live differently. You can't live the same way knowing that people are dying at the border. You can't live the same way knowing that kids are afraid their parents might be deported. You reject the diabolic, dehumanizing, and divisive forces at work in our society and you choose life. All of that gives you the strength to keep carrying on, to share the stories with neighbors and friends, to march, to keep vigil, to vote, and to knock on the doors of elected officials. And it brings more people into the circle.

On a more practical note, reform is long overdue. And it's an unpaid debt. Let's not forget, in many ways, immigrants are already at the center of our society. During the pandemic, Dreamers and essential workers without documents kept us healthy and fed and kept the economy going, often at great risk to their own health, and some of them paid the ultimate sacrifice with their lives. Don't we owe them something in return? Our politicians need to catch up.

JG: Last November, your fellow bishops elected you to become chairman of the U.S. bishops' migration committee. What are your goals for that role?

BISHOP SEITZ: Above all, I want to be a servant to my brother bishops in the conference, to read the signs of the times with them, interpret the magisterium of Pope Francis on this issue in our American context, and do my part to help revitalize our witness to the social gospel. I also want to find creative ways to make sure migrants and refugees feel that the Church is with them. Wherever they're from, whatever their documentation status, whatever their faith commitment might be, they should feel that the Church is on their side and rooting for them. They need to feel God's mercy in everyday life. We've got to be ministers of joy. I want to understand from immigrant leaders how our Church can better stand with them in their work for reform so our advocacy can be grounded. There are so many inspiring immigrant leaders who are showing us the way. Many of them were formed in our parishes and church halls.

We've also got to work to reduce inequality and injustice abroad so people don't have to migrate. I ministered for a while in Honduras and I learned how important it is to be in touch with the pain in those countries. This is where the Church can play an important role. As a global Church, we can build bridges with faith communities in sending countries to learn from them and better understand how we can stand alongside them in their struggles.

JG: In 2020, you knelt down with a Black Lives Matter sign for eight minutes and forty-six seconds in a prayerful protest to draw attention to the police killing of George Floyd. That image drew international attention and Pope Francis praised you in an interview. Why did you take that stand and what do you think Catholics can do to support anti-racist movements?

BISHOP SEITZ: First of all, racism is real. We have to recognize it. If you don't acknowledge sin, how can you repent? We used to kneel at the beginning of every Mass and beat our breast because we're sinners. And second, those who suffer racism need to know we're with them. We believe in a crucified God, after all. George Floyd died because someone we gave a badge and a gun knelt on his neck. And we all know he's not alone. That's scandalous. When Jesus was killed, the cross was a sign of shame at first. It smelled of torture and death. But it became a source of life and communion. As Paul said, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." It was haunting to see how a people that were tired of injustice and death transformed a wretched image of asphyxiation into a rallying cry for justice and solidarity. On a human level, how could you not be moved by that? But on a spiritual level, how could you not hear the strains of the Gospel in their cries?

There were those who thought it was indecent or somehow threatening to the Christian message because not everyone involved in the anti-racism protests held all of our beliefs, but I don't agree. The Scriptures say "rejoice with them that rejoice, and weep with them that weep." We need to recognize that when people have a deep thirst for justice and recognition of human dignity, even when some might think differently from us, it isn't without a holy foundation. And we might have something to learn.

JG: For people who don't live on the border and are not actively involved in advocacy for immigrants, what are some ways to take action in their own states, neighborhoods, or parishes?

BISHOP SEITZ: Get to know the poor where you are. Go to Mass in a different language. Get involved in ministry with detained migrants and prisoners. Accompany someone to check in with ICE or to immigration court. Ask yourself who picks your food and pray for them before eating. Never refer to people as "illegals" again. Recognize the different cultural communities in your parish and give them the space to lift up their feast days. Eat together. Pray over the scriptures together. Make space for people from different countries to be leaders in your parish. Work with your parish to sponsor a refugee family. Support your local immigrants rights organizations. Thank a priest when he preaches on immigration. Vote. Allow God to push you out of your comfort zone. He will open up pathways for you to serve, to build community, to encounter Jesus and be transformed.

ROBERT RUBSAM

Alone in the City

'Edward Hopper's New York' at the Whitney Museum

I like walking the streets of New York. Sometimes I'll head up through Greenpoint to the Newtown Creek, or follow the Hudson River as it wraps around the Financial District, or even wander through the halogen-brightened streets of Midtown. I especially like walking at night, when whole neighborhoods empty out, and windows illuminate otherwise obscured worlds: the art-bedecked brownstones, the silk-walled supper clubs, the pocket-sized bedrooms with their fairy lights and IKEA containers. Recently, I turned toward a bodega's glass door and saw a cream-colored cat draped across an ATM, a drunk-looking man slowly running his fingers through its fur. You glimpse all these lives, and you are alone. You are presented with the vision of a bright, gleaming city, but at a distance.

Few artists have captured this sense as keenly as Edward Hopper. At a new exhibition of his New York work, I stood before painting after painting of bare apartments and deserted streets, and I felt like an outsider peering in through a cracked window. Even in the Whitney Museum's bustling, booming exhibition halls, he made me feel completely alone.

Hopper was born just north of the city in 1882. At the turn of the twentieth century, he began taking the ferry down to Manhattan to study at the New York School of Art and Design, where he developed a breezy, impressionistic style. His figures blend into their environments or disappear into shadow, overtaken by the overwhelming geography of the metropolis. Only the sunlight seems capable of standing apart.

Between 1906 and 1910, Hopper spent several long periods in Paris, a city he described (in a letter to his mother) as "graceful and beautiful," a stark contrast to New York's "raw disorder." One could see much of his career as an attempt to find Paris in New York, to discover some grace in all the chaos. His compositions became simpler, cleaner, and less populated. He trained his eye on stray figures crossing empty streets. The paintings achieve order, but at the price of loneliness.

Hopper found his subjects by wandering throughout the city, tramping sidewalks and crossing bridges and peering down from elevated trains. He painted movie theaters and cheap cafeterias, apartment blocks and brownstones, Central Park and Washington Square and Prospect Park in all manner of light. Again and again I pulled up at 1935's "House at Dusk," a long rectangular composition showing an apartment building, a strip of trees, and a soft green sky paling into night. Hopper captures both the last pure evening light and the harsher glow burning in each apartment, drawing our attention to an armchair, a mantelpiece, and a woman leaning out a window, her head turned right, focused on some invisible street scene just below the frame. The effect is subtle, but in its way Hopper's painting is as unsettling as anything by Magritte. The building is small, its residents even smaller, dwarfed by the sky and the surrounding city.

Hopper catches his subjects in private moments, with their backs turned and their eyes averted. His windows form a kind of invisible barrier, generating both intimacy and distance. Even when his viewpoint is from within the room, though, Hopper's subjects might as well be on the other side of the city. There's never the slightest suggestion they know they're being looked at.

What Hopper saw was a city in stasis. His figures appear frozen, forever on the verge of motion—*about* to turn a page or press down on a piano key. His ushers and actors and café dwellers are always waiting for something, as if hoping the city itself might reach out and carry them forward. Even a bucking horse and the wake of a motorboat seem frozen in place, arrested in time. All paintings are still, but Hopper's are stiller.

Hopper is often described as a painter of "alienation"—during my time at the Whitney, I even heard one man grumble the word from his bench. This exhibition certainly has its share of shuttered storefronts and lonesome café women, the kinds of images that by now have become visual shorthand for the estrangement of modern life. But his work also has a quiet warmth. His urban labyrinth is full of Vermeerian sunlight; his spare apartments are homey, at ease with their loneliness.

Part of the warmth and ease come from the recurring visage of a quiet, sharp-nosed blonde woman. In 1924, Hopper married the artist, actor, and designer Josephine Verstille Nivison. Edward and Jo lived together at 3 Washington Square North until their deaths, going to the movies, exploring the city, and painting side-by-side. Some of Jo's watercolors—a potbellied stove; spectral Washington Square; Hopper, balding, at his easel—are displayed beside a portrait painted by her husband, showing her turned away, right arm raised, at work on her own.

Nivison's image appears frequently in Hopper's work—as a movie theater attendant, a burlesque dancer, a comedian, a waitress, and as one of the many still women gazing mutely from their apartment windows. One senses that Hopper sought to fill the city with her likeness, to situate her in every hired room, every park, every office, as if to make the city livable by giving it the shape of their own private life. You sense that for Hopper, the geometry of a city is also that of a room, and that one person might easily stand in for a million others.

This might strike you as a somewhat cramped vision. But New York City is like that even now, and *your* New York will often conform to the contours of your life. You see the same strangers on the same subway lines,

House at Dusk, Edward Hopper, 1935

ARTEPIC/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

come to recognize panhandlers, identify the guy selling incense between stations by the sound of his voice. A whole neighborhood can be irradiated by the ending of a relationship. I once ran into a college acquaintance as she was leaving the restroom at McCarren Park. We chatted as if it had been just a few days, not a decade, since we had last seen each other. Then she went her way and I went mine. There are as many New Yorks as there are New Yorkers, and despite all the anonymous crowds, each of these New Yorks includes pockets of familiarity and solitude.

The Whitney's faintly hectoring signage insists, again and again, that Hopper's paintings do not describe any "real" New York; instead, they present the New York of his dreams and memories. His city seems to have the population of a small village (with an entirely white population). His late paintings no longer depict any recognizable place, drawing instead on a store of stock images: bedrooms, cafés, cavernous corner offices. Yet looking at a painting like *New York Movie*, I see a New York I know well, albeit one wearing a vintage outfit. Jo's usher could easily be thousands of workers all across the city right now: grocery-store clerks, overnight doormen, bouncers, delivery drivers sitting astride their e-bikes, gallery attendants staring at their phones. Or she could be any one of the people who seem just to be killing time as they walk past bustling restaurants and foggy bars. This is still a city of people forever on the verge, always *about* to be doing something, always expecting something more.

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ALEXANDER STERN

Trapped in the Aura

'White Noise'

Professor Jack Gladney, the narrator of Don DeLillo's 1985 novel, *White Noise*, yearns for stasis. "Let's enjoy these aimless days while we can," he tells himself, "fearing some kind of deft acceleration." At another point Gladney all but prays, "Let the seasons drift. Do not advance the action according to a plan." The novel does not just explore resistance to change and the fear of death; it is arguably about being an uninvolved spectator, a consumer, part of a crowd. Even when an environmental disaster upends the Gladney family's comfortable life in a well-off university town, they remain detached observers. DeLillo's characters exhibit and reflect on the ways vast, unknowable systems of production and information proliferate and place the individual at an often confusing—though in some ways commanding—distance from reality. Death looms over this spectatorship as the one reality that can't be observed from a pleasant distance.

These themes present some significant challenges to the filmmaker attempting to adapt *White Noise* for the screen. In how-to books, screenwriting experts write endlessly of a movie's need for conflict, tension, and suspense. French director François Truffaut wrote that "the art of creating suspense is also the art of involving the audience, so that the viewer is actually a participant in the film." But how to involve the audience when the story is about being an audience? How, more specifically, to enliven the characters' detachment? How to dramatize the passive consumption of information and commodities? And how to create real drama out of dialogue that often seems a mouthpiece for DeLillo's own philosophical musings on things like supermarket shopping, tourism, and doctors' visits?

Noah Baumbach seems in many ways an unlikely candidate for the job. Although his films have certainly reached philosophical heights at points, they usually start on the ground, in the muck of real human emotion: the childhood confusion and loss of his breakthrough film, *The Squid and the Whale*; the rudderless malaise of post-graduate adulthood in *Kicking and Screaming*; the midlife depression and shame of *Greenberg*. His scenarios are typically drawn from real life (if Park Slope qualifies as real life) and his films succeed most when the particulars—of character, conversation, or conflict—flash up into recognizable universals, not when a philosophical concept is embedded in some suitably evocative fiction. Not everyone knows what it's like to have a father like Dustin Hoffman's character in *The Meyerowitz Stories*, who takes out frustrations about a middling artistic career on long-suffering adult children, but most of us know what it's like to deal with self-involved relatives and the damage such people do without knowing it.

Baumbach is aware that *White Noise* is different from the kind of story he usually tells; it exists, as he put it in an interview with the *New York Times*, in its own "elevated reality." DeLillo's novel derives its power from the fact that its characters are somewhat abstract—and abstracted. They are more observant, detached, and reflective than real people, more like novelists themselves than conventional characters. Take, for example, the professors in the university's "popular culture department," which shares a building with Gladney's "Hitler studies," a subject he has put on the map. These professors, ex–New Yorkers who've emigrated to the unspecified Midwestern university, are effectively experts in their own childhoods. They take up questions such as the meaning of the American movie car crash, generic brands at the grocery stores, and where they were when James Dean died. As visiting professor and Gladney's friend, Murray Jay Siskind, puts it, "I understand the music, I understand the movies, I even see how comic books can tell us things. But there are full professors in this place who read nothing but cereal boxes." Gladney himself has managed to turn Adolf Hitler into a kind of pop-culture object. Hitler is studied not as a historical figure but as a cultural phenomenon who's managed to produce a certain kind of timeless aura that floats free of the actually existing dictator.

Interestingly, the most significant and famous pop cultural artifact in the book—the "most photographed barn in America"—goes unphotographed in Baumbach's adaptation, even though the movie is generally quite faithful to the book, in content if not in tone. When, in the book, Siskind and Gladney go to visit the nearby barn, Siskind concludes that it has become impossible to see it. The signs leading up to the site, the tourists setting up their tripods, the postcards sold in a booth next to the barn—all these conspire to lend the site an aura that effectively obscures the real barn even when one is looking right at it. DeLillo reinforces this assessment by never actually describing the barn. In Baumbach's medium, of course, such an omission—filming the scene without filming the barn—would have been much more glaring, which perhaps explains why the episode is cut. "We're not here to capture an image," Siskind says, "we're here to maintain one.... We can't get outside the aura."

The barn episode distills a number of the novel's themes and sets the stage for its second section, which concerns what the media eventually decide to dub "The Airborne Toxic Event." A poisonous gas, Nyodene D., is released into the air after a train accident near the Gladneys' home. Eventually the town is evacuated and the Gladneys pile into their rusted station wagon to join a comical mass flight, first to an abandoned Boy Scout camp and then to an abandoned karate studio. On the way, Jack is exposed to Nyodene D. when he leaves the car to fill up the gas tank.

Here, too, there is a distinct sense that even in the midst of a pressing and potentially life-threatening event, the

Adam Driver, Greta Gerwig, and Don Cheadle in *White Noise* (2022)

characters can't quite get outside the aura. On their way from the Boy Scout camp to the karate studio, Jack attempts a shortcut through the woods and accidentally fords a creek in the station wagon as the toxic cloud looms overhead. Still, the children in the backseat can't seem to focus on the disaster. The eldest son, Heinrich, proposes a trivia contest: "I'll give anybody in this car five dollars... if you can tell me whether more people died building the pyramids in Egypt or building the Great Wall of China." The Airborne Toxic Event is treated as if it's just another channel on TV, of interest only when there's nothing better on.

In this part of the film, it becomes clearer why Baumbach took on the project: the Airborne Toxic Event is an analogue for Covid. In both cases, people don surgical masks to protect themselves; misinformation and unfounded speculation about the disaster proliferate; things go "back to normal" without ever quite being like they were before. And, as with Covid, the real disaster is rarely confronted directly but almost entirely superseded by representations of it.

For example, the radio reports that Nyodene D. causes not nausea—as was initially thought—but heart palpitations and déjà vu. So, when Jack's daughter Denise makes a break for the bathroom to throw up, his son Heinrich tells her she's displaying "outdated symptoms." The team assisting at the evacuation site is actually part of a simulated evacuation program, but instead of admitting that they've been thrown into the real thing, the staff insist that they're actually using the real thing as a model for future simulations. When they run the data on Jack's exposure, it comes back "pulsing stars," and Jack is told, "You are the sum total of your data. No man escapes that." One is reminded of our now much more pervasive and inescapable "personal data"—the digital representations that seem to determine our fate more than our lived reality does—as well as of the way the reality of Covid quickly became swamped beneath its senseless role in a preexisting culture war that played out on cable news and Twitter.

Baumbach films most of this straightforwardly, as a conventional Hollywood disaster sequence, albeit one with DeLillo's satirical details and clipped, cold dialogue. The result is incongruous. Baumbach's instincts routinely pull the film back down from DeLillo's "elevated reality" to Baumbach's own very human one. The actors often seem caught between these two worlds. You can almost see Adam Driver, who plays Jack Gladney, toggling back and forth between acting as an emblem of postmodern alienation and acting as a benign, concerned father. Unable to fully inhabit DeLillo's world, the actors often deliver lines from the novel as if they were simply reading from it. In the novel, the sweeping ideas and absurd plot reinforce one another; in Baumbach's film, they clash. At moments, it feels as if Baumbach expects us to take the disaster more seriously than the characters do.

This problem becomes even more pronounced in the film's third section, which concerns the efforts of Gladney's wife, Babette (Greta Gerwig), to cure her fear of death by participating in a trial for an experimental drug called Dylar. The pill has significant side effects, including memory loss and an inability to distinguish words from the objects they designate. As a result, she has to sleep with the drug's developer, Willie Mink, in order to get her hands on it. Jack eventually uncovers these facts and resolves to kill Mink, in part out of a misguided sense that this will somehow cure his own fear of death. In these scenes, Baumbach's desire to realistically render the emotional baggage between the couple sits uneasily with, and even distorts, DeLillo's satirical intent. Babette and Jack can conceive of death only as something like white noise, the sound the TV makes when the image isn't coming through.

When Jack discovers at the karate studio that his exposure to Nyodene D. may end up killing him, he tries to present himself as unperturbed to the other evacuees. "Trying to create a picture of an impassive man," he says, "seemed the only way to neutralize events." The line echoes the way that, in *White Noise*, reality is consistently neutralized or rendered irrelevant by various forms of media. Unfortunately, it also suggests the way DeLillo's novel is neutralized by Baumbach's own picture.

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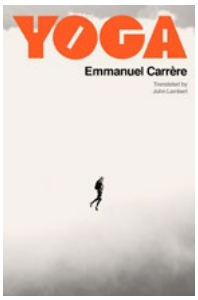
Continuing Not to Die

ANTHONY DOMESTICO

"Thus inevitably does the universe wear our own color, and every object fall successively into the subject itself." So writes Ralph Waldo Emerson towards the end of his great 1844 essay, "Experience." Earlier in that essay, Emerson describes the realization that "we do not see directly, but mediately" as constituting "the Fall of Man." There is sorrow in coming to know that experience is subjectivity—that is to say, partiality and distortion—all the way down. Yet Emerson finally urges his readers toward exertion, not despair: "We must hold hard to this poverty, however scandalous, and by more vigorous self-recoveries, after the sallies of action, possess our axis more firmly." The self, with all its insufficiencies, isn't to be escaped from but held on to, possessed, mastered. It's a tilted axis, yes, but it's the only axis we have.

"I've always been interested in my own mental activity, to the point of making it my trade." So writes Emmanuel Carrère in his latest hard-to-classify book, *Yoga*, translated by John Lambert. In being interested in his own subjectivity, the French memoirist, novelist, and filmmaker Carrère follows in the footsteps of his "patron saint," Michel de Montaigne. (Emerson likewise loved Montaigne, describing him as "the frankest and honestest of all writers.") Carrère, like Emerson and Montaigne, has long courted charges of narcissism. His 2000 book of nonfiction, *The Adversary*, opens like this: "On the Saturday morning of January 9, 1993, while Jean-Claude Romand was killing his wife and children, I was with mine in a parent-teacher meeting at the school attended by Gabriel, our eldest son." His 2009 masterpiece, *Lives Other Than My Own*, begins with a tsunami in Sri Lanka. But it really begins with his own romantic life: "The night before the wave, I remember that Hélène and I talked about separating." (Carrère was on vacation in Sri Lanka in 2004 when the tsunami hit and subsequently spent time with families who lost loved ones.)



YOGA
EMMANUEL CARRÈRE
TRANS. BY JOHN LAMBERT
Picador
$20 | 352 pp.

Both openings foreground rather than obscure the self and its involvements. In order to write about the fascinatingly repellant Romand, Carrère must first, or simultaneously, write about himself. Yes, Romand is a con man. But isn't the writer one, too? After all, in writing his book, Carrère had to try to swindle the swindler, writing to Romand in prison with the hopes of charming him into a correspondence. Romand is a moral monster, absolutely. But isn't the person who profiles Romand—who mines his life and the lives he ended for material—a kind of monster as well? (As Janet Malcolm famously put it, "Every journalist who is not too stupid or full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible.") Similarly, in order to write about the large-scale, historic tragedy of the tsunami, Carrère must first, or simultaneously, write about the small-scale, personal tragedies of his own experience. You don't see others clearly by forgetting yourself, Carrère suggests. You see others clearly by seeing yourself clearly, by looking with care at yourself, and at them, and at yourself looking at them. Every object of perception—the killer

Emmanuel Carrère

ED ALCOCK

you're writing about, the tragedy you're grappling with—falls into the subject itself. There's no way out but through.

Carrère steers clear of narcissism in three ways: first, by acknowledging his own self-involvement; second, by making the case for the necessity *of* self-involvement in any act of seeing or thinking or writing; finally, by suggesting that this interest in the self is the route to becoming interested in other selves. In a recent profile in the *New Yorker*, Carrère described his attitude toward the people who live and work around him: "I know nothing about them. And I am not that interested. And I think it's bad not to be interested. I think, even, it's wrong." Interest in others doesn't come naturally to Carrère. But it's only by attending to himself, by noticing that he doesn't notice others, that he can begin to rectify this cognitive and moral weakness. In *Lives Other Than My Own*, Carrère quotes the nineteenth-century French doctor Pierre Cazenave, who spoke of his "unconditional solidarity with what the human condition holds of unfathomable distress." How this solidarity can be achieved is, to use one of Carrère's favorite words, mysterious. But it's the task that he has set himself in his best work: to recognize himself in others.

This is not really the task that Carrère has set himself in *Yoga*. On the book's very first page, he announces his initial aim is "to write an upbeat, subtle little book on yoga." (At the time of the book's genesis, Carrère had been practicing meditation for over twenty years.) The plan was simple: he would go on an intensive yoga retreat in the French countryside and write a bestseller about his experience there. Of course, going on a yoga retreat with the intent of writing about it seems to defeat the very purpose of the retreat. Carrère gets around things, or at least justifies his task to himself, by arguing that there is a deep similarity between the task of the writer and the task of the meditator. He quotes a favorite passage from the German Romantic Ludwig Börne, who urges the would-be writer to "take a few sheets of paper and for three days on end write down, without fabrication or hypocrisy, everything that comes into your head." Carrère has thought about this advice, and its beautiful impossibility, for years, and he's come to believe that Börne's challenge to the writer is like the challenge to the meditator:

> Writing down everything that goes through your head 'without fabrication' is exactly the same as observing your breathing without modifying it. Which is to say: it's impossible. Still, it's worth trying. It's worth spending your whole life trying.

This is typical Carrère: take an apparent binary—interest in the self versus interest in others, writing versus yoga—and show that it's actually a dialectic, yin and yang.

With this methodological problem solved, Carrère goes on retreat, eager to write his "own version of those personal development books that sell so well in the bookshops." And the first hundred or so pages of *Yoga* are studded with self-helpy lines that you'd expect to read in such a book. We get one definition of meditation, then another, then another; we get telling anecdotes from Carrère's own life and wise sayings from spiritual masters. Carrère goes so far as to write a back-cover blurb for his prospective book. The blurb ends, "[Yoga] is a path. Others have taken it before us and shown us the way. If what they say is true, it's well worth embarking on the journey ourselves." This kind of book might "sell like hotcakes," as Carrère hopes. It would also be dull, closer to mere self-help than to Emerson's "vigorous self-recoveries." What differentiates the two? Here's Emerson: "It is but a choice between soft and turbulent dreams." You get mere self-help when the turbulence and difficulty of Emerson's self-possession gets lost in bromides about the journey being more important than the destination; when a fundamentally tragic vision of existence gets replaced with a prelapsarian one; when tension and accommodation get smoothed into facile harmony.

Luckily for Carrère's book, though sadly for the world, life intervenes. In the middle of his retreat, Carrère receives a call informing him that a friend, Bernard, has died in the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting, and he's been asked to give the eulogy. The retreat is over—and with it, we soon realize, Carrère's planned book.

Yoga's next, much shorter section tells of Carrère's brief, if promising, friendship with Bernard, one largely forged through literature. Then, with another chapter break, we move into entirely new territory: an intense sexual affair Carrère had with a woman—he calls her the "Gemini woman" after a statue she gave him—following another, different yoga retreat. Then, with even less warning, the narrative jumps again. Without much preamble or explanation, Carrère experiences a crippling depression. He is diagnosed with bipolar disorder and enters a psychiatric hospital, where he receives electroshock therapy. This section is the strongest, and strangest, in the book. It's up there with William Styron's *Darkness Visible* as an attempt to name the unnamable pain of mental illness. As Carrère puts it, "What I'm saying here sounds horrible, but in fact it was much more horrible than that. It was an unspeakable, indescribable, unqualifiable, and—the word hardly exists, but no matter—immemorable horror."

Within the text, what precipitated the breakdown remains unclear. Structurally, one might think that it's the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting. Carrère himself says that he "date[s] the start of [his] meltdown" to a conversation he had with the Gemini woman. It appears an interesting formal decision: the mind in mysterious, psychic pain is "immemorable," and so Carrère refuses to clarify the sequence of cause and effect. If you're familiar with the French literary scene, though, there's another explanation. Carrère and his wife, Hélène Deynck—who figures prominently in the *Lives Other Than My Own* and in several of Carrère's other books—got divorced during the writing of *Yoga*. He signed a contract saying he wouldn't mention her in his future writing without her permission. He reneged on this promise in the first draft of *Yoga*; the offending passages got cut. So the opacity here is less a formal choice than a legal requirement—though one that

has interesting, if ultimately undecidable, formal effects.

Toward the end of this section, titled "The Story of My Madness," Carrère is discharged from the hospital. "Good transient recovery but frequent relapses," his final report concludes. A few months later, he travels to Patmos for the summer, "where we have a house at the foot of the Monastery of Saint John the Theologian." (The "we" is left vague.) On vacation, the black dog of depression begins to stalk Carrère again: "I'm afraid the madness will return," he writes. "I'm afraid I'll be the plaything of some inner monster, over whom I have no control." A journalist friend tells Carrère about her recent assignment to the Greek island of Leros, where she reported on the refugee crisis. An idea immediately presents itself: "On this nearby island, where serious things are happening, fate may be offering me a second chance to get away from myself." And so we have one final jump to Leros, where Carrère teaches creative writing to migrants fleeing Afghanistan, Syria, and other countries. Once more, I hear the ghost of Emerson's "Experience": "There are moods in which we court suffering, in the hope that here at least we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth." Such hopes usually fail, though Carrère's don't—or not entirely. He teaches and drinks wine and hears of lives more broken than his own. This episode section ends with tempered optimism. The self and the world aren't as one, but they aren't at war, either: "it's quite surprising, but the fact is that I almost feel good."

Carrère's books always thrive on a series of constitutive tensions. At the level of the sentence, they strive for, and regularly achieve, cleanness and lucidity. "That's what I like in my work," he's written, "when it's simple, obvious, when it gets things right." Yet he addresses subjects that refuse clean elucidation: sex, desire, humiliation. His books are deeply self-indulgent even while they push the self to engage with lives and histories other than their own.

Yoga isn't as interested as some of his other books in recognizing the self in others. "Perhaps that's the most interesting thing in life," Carrère writes at one point, "trying to figure out what it's like to be someone else. That's one of the reasons people write books, another being to discover what it's like to be yourself. I mostly think about the latter." Maybe so, but he usually writes as much about the former. Not so in *Yoga*.

Late in the book, Carrère writes about *Yoga*'s primary tension:

> François Truffaut said that a film is a process of loss. The gap between the idea you had before starting it and the final result can be bigger or smaller: if it's small, the film is successful, if it's big, it's botched. That's what the artists of control think.... For others—including myself—the opposite is the case: the less the film or book resembles what they'd imagined, the longer and more unpredictable the path between the starting point and the end, the more the result surprises them, the happier they are.

Carrère wanted *Yoga* to be one thing and it ended up another. Of course, the same could be said about almost any piece of writing. What distinguishes *Yoga* is that this disjuncture between aim and achievement remains within the text itself. This refusal to close the gap—to fill the space separating initial idea from final result—is interesting, though maybe not as surprising as Carrère seems to think. After all, it's a move often made in contemporary autofiction.

In my less charitable moods, I suspect that the writer's principled refusal to close this gap is really just an excuse not to do the hard work of tidying things up. I don't think that's the case here. The book's final chapter opens, "I continue not to die, as best I can." *Yoga* displays hard work of a different kind: the hard work of recovering the self after it almost has been lost.

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St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix, Arizona

CNS PHOTO/AMBRIA HAMMEL, CATHOLIC SUN

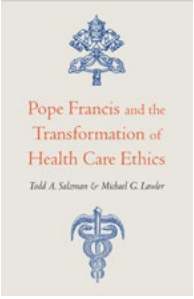
All a Matter of Perspective?

BERNARD G. PRUSAK

Catholic health care in the United States finds itself at a startling point of convergence with non-Catholic health care. On the one hand, after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, other health-care systems across the country have suddenly had to become more like Catholic health care in restricting abortion. (As of January 2023, thirteen states ban abortion with next to no exceptions; similar bans are pending in several other states.) On the other hand, in the context of fierce competition and dwindling margins, some Catholic health-care systems appear nearly indistinguishable from their most ruthless, for-profit counterparts. The economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton, famous for their research on the rise of midlife morbidity and mortality in the United States over the past twenty-plus years, have claimed that "[t]he American healthcare industry is not good at promoting health, but it excels at taking money from all of us for its benefit. It is an engine of inequality." The *New York Times* recently published two shocking stories about the Providence health-care system and about Bon Secours Mercy Health—both officially Catholic—showing that they have taken money from the poor and vulnerable to benefit themselves. In an inversion of Catholic social teaching, the poor received special attention not to be served, but to be shaken down.

It would be both ungenerous and inaccurate to suggest that those cases are the rule rather than egregious exceptions to it. At bottom, the mission of Catholic health care remains to tend the sick and proclaim the Kingdom of God. Nonetheless, these examples remind us that Catholic health care in the United States—comprising more than six hundred hospitals that employ more than half a million people and see one out of every six patients—is a very big business and therefore subject to the same market forces and trends characteristic of U.S. capitalism at large. Catholic health care also has to contend with the pitfalls of U.S. politics, as it did a decade ago in the uproar over the Affordable Care Act's contraception-coverage mandate, and as it will likely have to do in the coming backlash against abortion restrictions. A Catholic hospital's refusal to perform an abortion for a woman who is miscarrying, but whose nonviable fetus still has heart tones, means one thing when a non-Catholic hospital is willing to step into the breach. It will mean something else when a non-Catholic hospital declines transfer so that it won't have to negotiate a poorly written state abortion law, and a woman dies of hemorrhage and sepsis in a Catholic hospital's care.

Enter Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler's *Pope Francis and the Transformation of Health Care Ethics*. Salzman and Lawler are moral theologians at Creighton University who have often collaborated. They present their book as a "critical commentary" on the sixth and most recent edition of the "Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services" (ERDs), issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in 2018. In fact, their book is an extended polemic against the USCCB. A representative



POPE FRANCIS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF HEALTH CARE ETHICS

TODD A. SALZMAN AND MICHAEL G. LAWLER

Georgetown University Press

$34.95 | 240 pp.

sentence begins, "Unfortunately, most bishops in the United States and the USCCB as a body…." Exhortation and excoriation follow. According to Salzman and Lawler, the 2018 ERDs, as they're typically called, are "problematic anthropologically, methodologically, ecclesiologically, and pastorally." Their book's second thesis is that "Francis's… contributions and shift in emphases invite a substantial revision of the ERD and the formulation of new directives."

There is much that is just about Salzman and Lawler's polemic, but there is also much that is misguided. They inveigh against authoritarianism in the Church with a righteous passion that sometimes sounds a little too, well, authoritative. Their book prompts the question of whether Catholic health care can find a viable middle way—a center that can hold, so to speak, against strident voices on both the Right and Left.

The ERDs, to quote from the sixth edition's preamble, "provide authoritative guidance on certain moral issues that face Catholic health care today." They must be observed for a Catholic health-care service to be recognized as Catholic. Violations may result, at the local bishop's discretion, in a service losing its Catholic status.

The ERDs originated in 1948, but they took a hard legalistic turn in 1971, partly in response to changing medical norms with respect to abortion in the United States and partly in response to variations in practice in Catholic hospitals in the 1960s with respect to sterilization and the distribution of contraceptives. In 1994, the bishops significantly expanded the document with the aim of ensuring uniformity. As the Jesuit ethicist Kevin William Wildes observed in a 1995 commentary, "In contrast to the complexity of traditional Catholic morality, the [1994] directives seek to remove areas of ambiguity and leave little room for judgment." Wildes went on to suggest that "[o]ne way to understand the Directives is to see them as an effort by those *in* authority [e.g., bishops] to restrict the space and liberty of those who are *an* authority [e.g., moral theologians]."

Salzman and Lawler couldn't agree more. The passage in the 2018 ERDs that bothers them the most—to judge from how often they refer to it—appears toward the end of the document's introduction:

> While the Church cannot furnish a ready answer to every moral dilemma, there are many questions about which she provides normative guidance and direction. In the absence of determination by the magisterium, but never contrary to church teaching, the guidance of approved authors can offer appropriate guidance for ethical decision making.

Unsurprisingly, the criteria to qualify as "approved" are not articulated. For it goes without saying that an approved author is someone who never disagrees with Church authorities: in Wildes's terms, the people *in* authority.

The 2018 ERDs are a direct descendant of the 1994 ERDs, with some subtractions and additions. Salzman and Lawler focus on the 2018 ERDs not only because they are the most recent but also because, they claim, it is "perplexing and even scandalous" that the USCCB did not revise the ERDs in light of Pope Francis's "anthropological and methodological contributions."

Salzman and Lawler are correct that the ERDs reflect a "hierarchical ecclesiology." As they write with a touch of snark, "[t]he revised *ERD* reads as if its composers never heard of" *Lumen gentium*, Vatican II's constitution on the Church. The model of Church in the ERDs is top-down, heavily invested in the authority of bishops, which, as Salzman and Lawler rightly note, has been badly damaged by the Church's sexual-abuse scandal. Furthermore, the ERDs show no interest in the *sensus fidelium* and do not acknowledge that experience might be, as Salzman and Lawler propose, "a source of ethical knowledge."

Here the case that Salzman and Lawler discuss at length is illuminating. In November 2009, the ethics committee, chaired by Sr. Margaret McBride, RSM, of St. Joseph's Hospital in Phoenix, Arizona, permitted the abortion of an eleven-week-old fetus. The pregnant woman was suffering from acute pulmonary hypertension, which her doctors judged would prove imminently fatal for both her and her child. After the fact, Phoenix's then-bishop, Thomas J. Olmsted, criticized both Sr. McBride and the hospital, which he stripped of its Catholic status after it refused to repent of its decision in the case. As Salzman and Lawler comment, "There is no indication [in the 2018 edition of the ERDs] that this case had any impact on the recognition of the possibility of conflicts in interpreting and applying the ERD, resolving such conflicts, or formulating new directives in light of such conflicts." I have argued elsewhere that the Phoenix case indicates the need for the ERDs to incorporate a principle of lesser evil, but the bishops seem to have drawn neither this lesson nor any other.

Salzman and Lawler are on shakier ground when they discuss their theory of ethical knowledge (their "metaethics"), the authority of individual conscience, and some of Pope Francis's pronouncements. Their "metaethical epistemology" is perspectivism, which they explain by observing that although the view from a first-story window is different from the view from a twenty-story window, neither is false. Both are "partial and particular." That's certainly fair enough for views from windows, but it's a far leap to argue, as they go on to do, that "[p]erspective is also what accounts for different moral judgments. Seeing and judging from different perspectives accounts for the different judgments on the morality or immorality of abortion and of removing [artificial nutrition and hydration] from a [persistent vegetative state] patient." In short, the rightness or wrongness of these practices depends, they seem to suggest, on one's point of view: proponents and opponents can both be partially right. It is hard to imagine that Salzman and Lawler would make a similar claim about, for example, an act of sexism or racism.

Along similar lines, they also write that "[t]he morality of an action is largely controlled by the subject's

motive." This may not seem controversial—after all, doesn't the Church teach that the morality of an act depends partly on one's intention? But intention is a quite different concept from motive. I may *intend* to rob a bank with various motives, some of them better than others; perhaps I want to distribute the money to the poor. But a worthy motive doesn't make my intention right. The deeper confusion here has to do with how to specify an action for the purpose of moral evaluation. In brief, it is a mistake to reduce the so-called object of an action to what is physically done—Pope John Paul II is right in his encyclical *Veritatis splendor* that "the object of a given moral act" is not just "a process or an event of the merely physical order"—but it is equally a mistake to reduce the object of an action to the agent's purpose. As the philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe remarked in 1982, "Circumstances, and the immediate facts about the means you are choosing to your ends, dictate what descriptions of your intention you must admit."

Salzman and Lawler propose their account of the authority of individual conscience in response to another passage in the ERDs that they vehemently dislike—the last paragraph of the introduction to Part 1, which reads as follows:

> [W]ithin a pluralistic society, Catholic health care services will encounter requests for medical procedures contrary to the moral teachings of the Church. Catholic health care does not offend the rights of individual conscience by refusing to provide or permit medical procedures that are judged morally wrong by the teaching authority of the Church.

Salzman and Lawler reply:

> The prioritization of Church teaching, the institution, and absolute norms over conscience contradicts the long-established tradition on the authority and inviolability of a well-informed conscience and is, therefore, a violation of human dignity and the common good.

Remarkably, they manage to put this point in even stronger terms: "The ERD subordinates the authority and inviolability of patient conscience to the health care institution and, ultimately, to the authority of the bishop. This usurpation reflects an assault on human dignity and a violation of justice." Citing *Dignitatis humanae*, Vatican II's declaration on religious freedom, they argue that "no Catholic is 'to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience. Nor…is he to be restrained from acting in accord with his conscience, especially in matters religious' (DH, 3) and also medical." That's quite a stretch. They also claim that "it seems to be a violation of human dignity and the authority and inviolability of individual conscience to declare certain acts 'intrinsically immoral' without consideration of the perspective of the acting person." But again, as Anscombe pointed out, what one can say one intends is constrained by the structure of what one is actually doing. Hoary denunciations of "physicalism," which recur throughout the book, fail to answer this objection.

It is a mistake to reduce the so-called object of an action to what is physically done, but it is equally a mistake to reduce the object of an action to the agent's purpose.

That said, it is true that accommodating conscientious objection is a challenge for every organization, and it is also true that the ERDs make no provision for it. Yet institutions, too, may be said to have a kind of conscience. Salzman and Lawler dismiss that claim on the grounds that "conscience requires subjectivity, which institutions do not have." By contrast, the bioethicist Daniel Sulmasy has claimed that conscience requires "a fundamental moral commitment…to moral integrity," which in fact institutions may have.

The enlistment of Pope Francis in Salzman and Lawler's argument for the transformation of healthcare ethics is also problematic. They claim, for example, that "Pope Francis's recent statements on marriage and the family that natural methods of fertility regulation are to be 'promoted'" are "very different from *Humanae vitae*'s and the ERD's absolute condemnation of contraception." According to them, he "does not absolutely forbid contraception and may, in fact, be interpreted to promote it." They thus write that "Pope Francis and revisionist moral theologians maintain that contraception may be either right or wrong depending on how it impacts human relationships." This is simply wishful thinking. Francis hasn't (yet) said any such thing.

Salzman and Lawler are right that ERDs reflecting Francis's priorities would give much greater attention to "social justice and environmental issues." And I think they're also right to consider Francis's 2016 apostolic exhortation, *Amoris laetitia*, as potentially of great significance for Catholic moral thought. As they observe, *Amoris laetitia*, especially in its notorious chapter 8, emphasizes "conscience, discernment, and the virtues." But the document's potential is lost if its teaching is reduced to the claim that individuals have the right in conscience to do the good as they see it. As David Cloutier and Robert Koerpel have recently explained at length, conscience in *Amoris laetitia* is not opposed to law, but is instead the way that persons discern how objective norms apply to them in their concrete, complex circumstances.

Salzman and Lawler close their book by proposing "to shift the ERD from a focus on absolute norms and intrinsically evil acts to principled guidelines for forming consciences." That sounds reasonable enough, but Catholic health care will need a different, more rigorous book to make progress toward that end.

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All Mirrors

PAUL MOSES

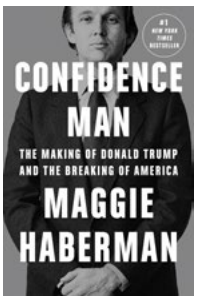
As a newspaper reporter in 1980s New York, I did my best to avoid writing about Donald Trump—or any other celebrities. In practical terms, that meant staying out of the line of sight of the city desk as much as possible, which I accomplished by getting assigned to beats in City Hall and the courts.

But late one night, as I covered an important, dull meeting in City Hall, a public-relations person told me that Donald Trump was waiting to be interviewed. I was ushered into some office where he sat behind a small desk. He wanted to talk about his plan to renovate the ice rink in Central Park, a job the city government had dithered over for six years. I was struck by his piercing stare—looking not at me, but over my right shoulder, and seemingly far into the distance.

What I took away was that the stare was his "man of destiny" look, as if he were posing for a statue of the American entrepreneur to the rescue. His pose that night always seemed laughable until I realized recently that the joke was on me. For Trump's destiny turned out to be large indeed: in that early venture into the civic arena, he was taking one more step in what Maggie Haberman's smartly probing new book calls "The Making of Donald Trump."

Haberman's book is a devastating character study—all the more so because when she gets there after more than five hundred pages, she finds there is no "there" there for Trump. Or, as she explains in the book's concluding passage, "ultimately, almost no one really knows him.... [H]e is often simply, purely opaque, permitting people to read meaning and depth into every action, no matter how empty they may be." Donald Trump is all mirrors.

Donald Trump, mid-1980s



CONFIDENCE MAN
The Making of Donald Trump and the Breaking of America

MAGGIE HABERMAN
Penguin Press
$32 | 608 pp.

As a celebrity mogul, Trump made himself to order for an era when gossip was going mainstream in the news business. His gaudy glamour generated plenty of publicity; New York's tabloid press in particular was an eager victim, and soon enough the national media was as well, even prestige outlets. And yet, he was something of a joke. When the notion of a Trump presidential run was floated in 1987, Garry Trudeau lampooned him in his widely read "Doonesbury" comic strip. His Trump character claims to have a rapport with the average voter, explaining, "I've spent my whole life with people of modest means." A reporter asks in what capacity. "Evicting them. I've seen how these people live."

Haberman was one of the few reporters to view the man seriously as a potential political candidate. She writes that after being taken in by one of Trump's earlier feints toward running for president, in 2011, "Friends and sources in New York had mocked me as gullible for that coverage." But she had taken note of the enthusiastic reception Trump had received from voters in New Hampshire and realized earlier than most that he was a viable candidate.

Haberman came onto the scene as a City Hall reporter in the late 1990s for the *New York Post*, the paper that served as Trump's advocate in the gossip wars. She moved on to the paper's tabloid rival, the *New York Daily News*, and then to Politico and the *New York Times*. With the scrappy resourcefulness of a New York tabloid reporter and the clout and perspective of the *Times*, she is ideally suited to deconstruct how Trump fabricated his persona and explain how his backstory shapes his actions on the public stage.

BERNARD GOTFRYD/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

In Haberman's telling, Trump's story is built upon layers of falsehoods—it's all a con. For example, she looks into a 1980 interview Trump did with the *Times* in which he describes his foundational experience of attending the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge in 1964 at the age of eighteen. His tale was that he saw how Robert Moses, who oversaw the project, had cut out the bridge's designer from getting any notice that day. Trump claimed to realize "then and there" that "I don't want to be anybody's sucker." As Haberman reports, every detail in Trump's story was wrong; in fact, Moses had amply praised Othmar Ammann, calling him "the greatest living bridge engineer."

It's a small matter, but it sets a pattern. Trump tells a reporter his ancestry is Swedish. (It's German.) He posed as a publicist in phone calls to reporters. He falsely claimed to have made millions of dollars by selling his stocks just before the market crashed in 1987. He inflated the value of his financial holdings. He claimed after the 9/11 attack that he sent hundreds of workers to help clear the World Trade Center site, which Haberman could find no evidence for.

As Haberman makes clear, news media aided Trump's distortions. In one case that says a lot, a *New York Post* reporter and his editors essentially made up the quote that provided one of the era's more famous page-one tabloid headlines: MARLA BOASTS TO HER PALS ABOUT DONALD: "BEST SEX I'VE EVER HAD." As Haberman recounts, the *Post* reporter had interviewed a friend of Trump's girlfriend and later second wife, Marla Maples. The woman, who'd known Maples through an acting class they took, said Maples had boasted of the "romance" she had with Trump. "Uh, 'romance'—you mean, sex?" reporter Bill Hoffmann asked. "Well, yeah, sex too," she replied. "The best sex she ever had, I bet," Hoffmann suggested. "Yeah," the friend said, which became the basis for that immortal tabloid headline. Trump loved it.

Nineteen-eighties New York was a city trying to strut again after being crippled financially in the previous decade. Its racial polarization and fear of crime; its thirst for wealth and lost glamour; and the high-volume, over-the-top style of its leading public figures all weighed heavily in the baggage Trump unpacked in Washington. Like Mayor Edward Koch, Yankees owner George Steinbrenner (who inspired Trump's famous "You're fired" on *The Apprentice*, according to Haberman), and U.S. Attorney Rudolph Giuliani, Trump had the ability to get attention from a celebrity-crazed news media. He learned politics from his amoral fixer attorney Roy Cohn, and from observing one of the last of the city's powerful county political bosses, Meade Esposito. "The dynamics that defined New York City in the 1980s stayed with Trump for decades; he often seemed frozen in time there," Haberman writes.

Much as he never really left New York, he'd never really left childhood either, in Haberman's portrayal. As president, he's subject to shifting whims and emotions like a three-year-old on a bad day, and just as suggestible and hungry for immediate gratification. "For dessert, Trump made sure to receive one more scoop of ice cream than his guests were served," Haberman writes at one point. Trump advisors became his monitors: "By the spring of 2020, it had become clear to many of his top advisors that Trump's impulse to undermine existing systems and bend institutions to his purposes was accompanied by erratic behavior and levels of anger requiring others to try to keep him on track nearly every hour of the day."

Confidence Man is enriched with vignettes that illustrate its subject. A humorous one—it sounds like a Doonesbury cartoon—has Trump calling himself a "popularist," even when Steve Bannon tells him the correct word is "populist." More serious is that, according to Haberman, Trump told aides "I'm never leaving" the White House after he'd lost the 2020 election. Or, as she reports, Trump was much sicker with Covid than acknowledged: "The doctors knew exactly how sick Trump had been; without the monoclonal antibody treatment, the administration's health officials believed, Trump may not have survived."

The problem Haberman faces is that Trump's character has already been so thoroughly exposed through his own bombastic actions on the public stage and the disclosures of former aides in memoirs and congressional testimony. Her great contribution is that the book shows how Trump's New York experience set the context for his odd and sometimes dangerous presidential style.

It's an important contribution, but one that has limits. Given the focus on his New York roots, I'd have liked a better sense from a Trump biography of where he got his affinity for white, blue-collar workers. His hectoring, needling, repetitive style of arguing politics sounds like one of the guys having at it in a Queens bar. Where did that come from? And why was Trump able to create a bond with what used to be called the workingman when so many other politicians couldn't?

The other story I'd like to have read more of is Haberman's. For doing her job as a reporter in a straightforward, honest way, she's put up with an incredible amount of blowback from both Right and Left, and from Trump as well. Critics on the Right should realize that her sources of information are primarily Trump's own aides, whose expressions of shock at the president's actions create a chorus in the book, and often enough, apparently Trump, who just can't stop himself from talking to the "third-rate reporter." Critics on the Left: nothing in the book would have changed anyone's vote if reported earlier. Haberman was masterful in managing her reportorial relationship with Trump & Co. for her newspaper readers' benefit. The space and flexibility of writing her own book has allowed her to build on that.

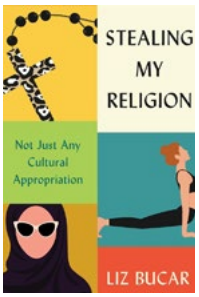
PAUL MOSES, *a contributing writer at* Commonweal, *is the author of* The Saint and the Sultan: The Crusades, Islam and Francis of Assisi's Mission of Peace *and* An Unlikely Union: The Love-Hate Story of New York's Irish and Italians. *Follow him on Twitter @PaulBMoses.*

Seekers, or Thieves?

KATHERINE LUCKY

When I first moved to New York for graduate school, I started doing yoga: an unoriginal choice for a young white woman, but my choice nevertheless. Yoga was relaxing and affordable. Between newcomer packages and free Saturday classes, I could exercise for less than the cost of a gym membership. I borrowed studio mats and wore ratty t-shirts. I couldn't do a handstand, but still managed a workout.

Yoga was also, some teachers implied, something more than exercise. It was an awakening. A practice—a *spiritual* one. And this I struggled with. I welcomed the silences surrounding each session, but some classes also had gongs, chanting, incense. Many had mantras we were asked to repeat. Teachers told us we were *awesome*; they told us to find light and power within; they asked us to tap into energies so we'd be balanced and peaceful—and also, it was implied, hotter. Our classes finished with a *namaste* as reverent as amen, but without explanation of who or what we were addressing.



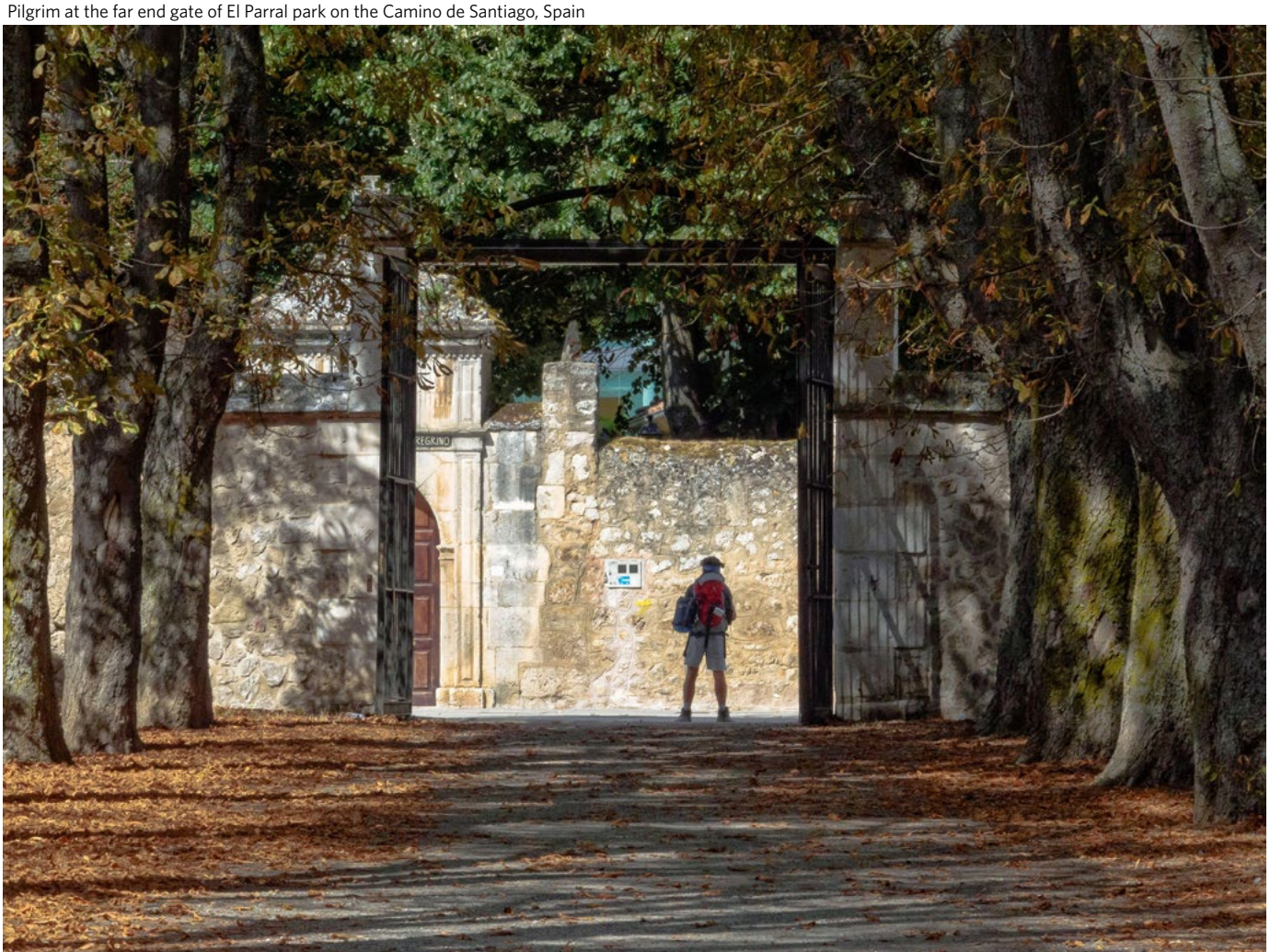
STEALING MY RELIGION
Not Just Any Cultural Appropriation

LIZ BUCAR
Harvard University Press
$27.95 | 272 pp.

As a Christian, I wasn't afraid of yoga: these classes were more woo-woo than witchcraft. But I did feel a little dishonest. It felt odd to lay a creed—even one as innocent as *love yourself*—over a workout class I was paying for.

A similar uneasiness pervades Liz Bucar's *Stealing My Religion*, a book-length study of what she calls "religious appropriation." Cross jewelry, meditation apps, and secular seders might seem innocuous. But using religious iconography, customs, and rituals outside of their original contexts, Bucar says, risks "instrumentalizing religion for political, educational, or therapeutic goals." Worse, it can "communicate contempt

Pilgrim at the far end gate of El Parral park on the Camino de Santiago, Spain



LKONYA/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

for the deeply held values of religious communities." Any form of appropriation—defined as a "dominant culture" stealing from "marginalized communities" in a way that causes "harm or offense"—is blameworthy. But *religious* appropriation is uniquely harmful, dealing not just with cultural artifacts like food and hairstyles but "ultimate concerns" and sacred truths.

Bucar, a professor of religion whose past work has focused on Muslim women's dress, takes "solidarity hijab" as her first example. Worn by non-Muslims to signal progressive politics, solidarity hijab might appear on a protest poster, in a fashion show, or in a profile picture of a liberal woman speaking out against Islamophobia. But even when well intentioned, these attempts at support are *also* acts of religious appropriation. They bypass the pious virtues associated with the hijab—"modesty, shyness, humility, obedience" before God—and make it a costume. This transformation risks "undermining the religious meaning of hijab for Muslim women who choose to wear it."

Even when well intentioned, the "solidarity hijab" is also a religious appropriation. It bypasses the pious virtues associated with the hijab—modesty, humility, obedience—and makes it a costume.

And, of course, that wearing is indeed a choice; Bucar finds solidarity hijab troublesome in part because many Muslim women *don't* wear the covering. To make it a symbol of Islam is to exclude these women from their faith, she writes, "neglecting the diversity of the Muslim community." She has other criticisms, too: solidarity hijab "coopts inclusivity in the form of a superficial allyship," "functions as virtue signaling rather than addressing actual injustice," and "de-centers" Muslims in the aftermath of Islamophobic violence.

These criticisms, though valid, aren't novel: just the familiar problems of tokenism and slacktivism, white feminism and orientalism. As Bucar walks readers through harms related to race, gender, and ethnicity, she slips into academic jargon. Her central claim—it's the *religious* nature of hijab that makes its appropriation *really* bad—is fresher and more interesting. Unfortunately, it doesn't get enough space. There's only one paragraph for Quranic verses on hijab, just a page about its implications for personal piety. I wish Bucar had offered more—perhaps a fuller reading of the Quran or other Muslim commentaries, perhaps more interviews with women about their devotional experiences, and certainly more analysis of hijab's private, pious meaning.

Yoga isn't so obvious a theft. But it's a theft all the same. It's problematic for lots of other reasons, too, Bucar reminds us: poorly paid teachers, anti-vax sentiments, gurus who sexually assault their students. Yoga can be "orientalist and racist and classist," creepy and exploitative. Fair. But again these critiques, even when correct, obscure Bucar's more provocative "yoga as religious appropriation" argument.

That appropriation, she writes, happens during "respite yoga," any yoga performed for health and wellness rather than devotion. With its mantras and haphazard Sanskrit, its token *oms* and *namastes* in between squats and planks, respite yoga is "marked as vaguely spiritual and yet requires no religious commitments," no adherence to the "Eastern devotional systems with which it is associated." "Devotion becomes respite, salvation becomes health," belittling the beliefs of those who practice yoga as an inherited spiritual tradition. During a training course, Bucar notices that a fellow classmate—an Indian woman who grew up practicing devotional yoga—is finding herself the odd one out. The woman struggles through unfamiliar postures and eventually curls up for a nap. "Although this yoga supposedly came from her homeland," Bucar writes, "it was unfamiliar and uncomfortable."

Even as Bucar argues for yoga's religious roots, she acknowledges that connecting yoga and religion is controversial. Yoga may have arisen in "Hindu contexts," but it is "not a Hindu practice," instead "the result of interaction between multiple South Asian traditions, nationalism, imperialism, capitalism, and globalization," influenced by Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, brought to America by Indian celebrity teachers. "Devotional yoga" can require "fidelity to beliefs, such as cosmologies and metaphysics," but not always. Vedanta, Tantra, the Vedas, yamas and niyamas…Bucar only briefly explains some of yoga's associated texts and philosophies. And even as she does so, she questions our ability to ever define what an "authentic" or "ancient" yoga even looks like. Yoga's fluid relationship to religion makes it hard to understand what exactly is being stolen, and who's doing the stealing.

Despite these complexities and reservations, I agree with the thrust of Bucar's argument. Really, I've *felt* her argument. Being sold something ancient and reverent for the sake of your "wellness," just as you'd be marketed a skin cream, is weird. The yoga videos I watch on YouTube abound with self-care slogans covered with foreign words and empty affirmations. The transcendence on offer is superficial, more about making money than cultivating souls.

So what's the yogi to do? Bucar doesn't propose "de-religioning yoga," "scrubbing" our classes of Eastern words, gestures, and beliefs. Instead, she opts to educate, trying

to "acknowledge her indebtedness to forms of devotional yoga" in the classes she teaches. She calls postures by both their English and Sanskrit names. She begins classes with quotes from the Bhagavad Gita. She doesn't say *namaste* (a "fetishization").

Solidarity hijab is never okay. But yoga? Bucar uneasily continues to teach, moving through postures with all her caveats and contextualizations. Why? Well, yoga helps with her back pain. And there's something else, too. Sometimes, in spite of her secularism, her practice "dips into devotion."

If the inward, mysterious nature of religious belief makes its appropriation wrong, it also makes it powerful. Bucar gestures at this in her introduction. Secular people arrogantly think they can "engage in borrowed spiritual practices without necessarily 'becoming religious,'" she writes: "Since we are only adopting the bits that 'work for us,' without buying into doctrines, dogmas, or values, we can safely remain outsiders." But "for many religious traditions, correct practice does not necessarily come after belief." Religion compels. Sometimes it even converts, turning outsiders into insiders, thefts into testimonies, and rituals into faith. A quiet moment on a yoga mat at home becomes a genuine meditation. A cross necklace, purchased on a whim, prompts a thought about Jesus. Religion is tricky that way. Often expressed through tangible things, it is itself intangible, liable to surprise.

No religious communities want their objects and practices desecrated. But exploration, borrowing, and sharing, whether explicitly for evangelism or as a simple act of welcome? That's often fine, even encouraged.

That perspective doesn't come through in the book's weakest case study, in which Bucar writes about the popular study-abroad trip she organizes along the Camino de Santiago in Spain. Bucar's course covers history, religion, and art; the students get blisters and take bad directions and eat pastries and confess secrets. Not all of them are Catholic. No problem. The Catholic Church, which issues certificates of completion called *Compostelas*, "promotes the route as an opportunity for personal spiritual reflection for those of any faith."

Bucar's students, appropriately, sign up for her class with different motivations. They want to encounter "the better parts of religion, such as taking time to think." They want to connect with "anything greater than me." They want to process grief. They want to do something physically difficult. During the walk, change occurs. One student, a self-described atheist, says the Cathedral of Santiago "made him feel like 'the Lord is bearing down on you.'" Some attend Mass. Others "wrestle with their demons." A few are moved.

But in hindsight, Bucar isn't proud of these trips, which she now considers religious appropriation. She worries that many of her students were "considering religious ritual merely something to instrumentalize for personal growth." She's concerned about the "existential risks" such a trip creates, the "crises of faith" it might precipitate even for Catholics. "I created and led a program that encouraged students not just to observe religion, but in a very real way, to do religion," she frets.

To me, that sounds lovely, different in kind from a hijab worn for politics or yoga done for nice abs. Even if these students don't have full theologies worked out, at least they're genuinely curious about the things of heaven. For Bucar, it's all very stressful, and she considers the power dynamics problematic. Of this, I just wasn't convinced. Even if lots of Protestants go on pilgrimage, the Catholic Church in Spain is hardly a minority culture being exploited by a majority, especially by another group of Christians looking at holy sites with the same reverence. Plus—whether motivated by good publicity, more money, or a genuine spirit of invitation—the Church *did* say, "Come one, come all!"

Bucar argues that it's not the institutional Church so much as individual lay Catholics who are victimized by other students—even other Christians!—on pilgrimage. She reserves special condemnation for a small group of Evangelical students, dubbed the "God Squad" by their peers. These students *do* sound obnoxious. They want to take Communion at Mass. They openly express their criticisms of Catholic relics and rituals, perhaps more frankly than they should. But Bucar comes down too hard on them; she reads them as solely sinister rather than at least somewhat sincere. Is the God Squad "planning to participate in the Eucharist to colonize Christianity"? Or are they genuinely confused about why they can't have access to a religious symbol that matters to them, too? When one of the Protestants says he is encouraged by "how much in common all Christians have," is that really, as Bucar puts it, an attempt to shut down conversation—or is it ecumenism? A few Catholic students offer other perspectives. The dialogue reads as a real educational opportunity, just what the trip was intended for.

"I'm not sure where the humanistic teaching of religion ends and a devotional trip begins," Bucar proclaims: "But I have no interest or competency in leading the latter." Unfortunately, "religion is not so easily controlled," and "I could not guarantee that the experience of the Camino for a Christian student would only be a case of humanistic learning." But why should it be? Bucar falls into the trap she accuses other secular liberals of springing, assuming that she can remain an outsider before the bones of saints, on the dusty paths, in the lofty sanctuaries.

Her students, no matter their preexisting beliefs, presume no such thing. Maybe, as in my yoga class, they're just coming for a good time, for drinking and flirtation and a trip to Europe. But I don't think so. To me, they seem eager and aware of implications, ready to engage with something or someone beyond themselves. They're coming not to steal, but to seek.

KATHERINE LUCKY *is an editor at* Christianity Today.

THE GARDENS OF THE *VILLA D'ESTE*
—in memory of Anthony Hecht

William Virgil Davis

If *style can teach us how to know the world,*
then this is surely it—in overabundance.
We stroll the grounds at our leisure, as the Cardinal
in the middle sixteenth century did, ruminating on
a way to seize the Papal throne. We stare at stone
statues, the too many fountains, whose hidden channels
snake behind facades, spewing an elaborate dance
of waters falling willy-nilly, wild, unfurled.

Ippolito, second son of his infamous father,
Alfonso (of Ferrara—Browning drew him well),
destined by birth for the Church—appointed archbishop,
astonishingly, at the age of ten and cardinal at thirty,
quickly seized jurisdiction of Hadrian's villa, thirsty
for the view, and immediately set up his shop
of elaborate grottos, arcades, terraces—a swell
in landscape hardly ever seen anywhere

before. When he died, all the villa's show
was returned to the estate; it's been maintained to
date. And so the old water organs still grind out
their daily tunes, the Neptune and the Oval fountains
fall and fill. And as we roam around, trying to contain
our sense of worshipful awe, wondering just what
it must have been like—and what we would do
with such a place—knowing we'd never know.

WILLIAM VIRGIL DAVIS *'s most recent book of poetry is* Dismantlements of Silence: Poems Selected and New *(2015). He has published five other books of poetry:* The Bones Poems; Landscape and Journey, *which won the New Criterion Poetry Prize and the Helen C. Smith Memorial Award for Poetry;* Winter Light; The Dark Hours, *which won the Calliope Press Chapbook Prize;* One Way to Reconstruct the Scene, *which won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize. His poems have appeared in major periodicals including* Agenda, *the* Atlantic Monthly, *the* Gettysburg Review, *the* Georgia Review, *the* Harvard Review, *the* Hopkins Review, *the* Hudson Review, *the* Nation, *the* Malahat Review, *the* New Criterion, PN Review, Poetry, Raritan, *the* Sewanee Review, Southwest Review, the Southern Review, *and* TriQuarterly, *among many others.*

JO MCGOWAN

When Literature Stood on Its Own

The letters of John Steinbeck

My first introduction to literary letters was Flannery O'Connor's *The Habit of Being*. I had never been a big fan of O'Connor's fiction, but her letters were riveting—theologically challenging, intellectually stimulating, and often hilarious. I devoured them, and have returned to them often for inspiration and ideas. I had a similar experience with Virginia Woolf: again, I wasn't crazy about her fiction, but her letters (and diaries) were a treat. Sometimes letters can be the gateway to a writer's more substantial work—that was how I read William Maxwell, Eudora Welty, Frank O'Hara, E. B. White, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Elizabeth Bishop—but if one has to choose, for me it's always the letters that win out.

I just finished reading John Steinbeck's *A Life in Letters*, a massive nine-hundred-page treasure covering nearly fifty years (from 1926 to 1968). In that period, Steinbeck lived through two difficult marriages and one of enormous happiness; he went from poverty and obscurity to wealth and world fame. The collection includes Steinbeck's correspondence with childhood friends with whom he stayed in touch, along with letters to and from presidents, artists, and international celebrities.

I read it while recovering from chikungunya, a mysterious and very painful viral disease whose only cure is rest, and Steinbeck's voice was so hypnotic it entered my dreams and colored my own letter writing. I loved his letters so much I want others to know about them too, for they recall an era when literature stood on its own, without hype or promotions or an Instagram account, and when political discourse was conducted with dignity and respect, even when people disagreed.

Of course, Steinbeck's time had its own share of conflict. Several of his books were banned and he experienced threats, violence, and frequent intimidation. His hometown library refused to carry his books, and *The Grapes of Wrath* created such a furor among farm owners that a friend in the sheriff's department in Santa Clara, California, gave him a long string of warnings, including one that he should never go into a hotel alone: "The boys got a rape case set up for you. You get alone in a hotel and a dame will come in, tear off her clothes, scratch her face and scream and you try and talk yourself out of that one. They won't touch your book but there's easier ways."

Steinbeck just kept working. As desperate as he often was for money (he was on welfare during the Depression, and his first wife took jobs under the WPA so that he could keep writing), he wouldn't compromise. When doing a story for *Life* magazine on the conditions of migrant workers who were living in tents in flooded fields, he told his agent that *Fortune* magazine had also asked for an article: "But I won't [do it]. I don't like the audience.... I'm sorry but I simply can't make money on these people. The suffering is too great for me to cash in on it." Where artistic standards were concerned, he was similarly intransigent. When *Reader's Digest* wanted to do its version of *The Grapes of Wrath*, his response was: "I don't like digests. If I could have written it shorter I would have."

His commitment to farmworkers in particular and to the poor in general is a theme running throughout his fiction and journalism. For him, it was a fundamental function of the artist: "I am a very dangerous revolutionary," he said. "Herein is my revolt: I will fight for the right of the individual to function as an individual without pressure from any direction. I am unalterably opposed to any interference with the creative mind. It may be wrong, but out of it come the only rights we know. I place myself at the service of this revolutionary cause. The minds and spirits of men can and will be free."

As Steinbeck became more aware of the injustices done to migrant workers, the immigration issues in Mexico, and the growing control of the economy by fewer and fewer powerful companies, he took it upon himself to write to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt directly and was given a personal meeting with him. Later, Adlai Stevenson became a close friend. President John F. Kennedy asked him to go to the Soviet Union to promote a dialogue between Russian writers and artists and their American counterparts. ("From the President, I take a request as an order," he wrote to friends.) It was while Steinbeck was in Russia with his wife Elaine that JFK was assassinated. He wrote to his agent about their shock and grief: "We are lonesome and homesick. Yesterday a woman came up to Elaine and said, 'I have to talk to an American. I am an American.' They fell into each other's arms and wept. I knew it, but you can't tell anyone—it isn't possible." Steinbeck was the one person Jackie Kennedy wanted to write a book about her husband after his death. Although nothing ever came of the project, she later referred to the letters (included in this collection)

John Steinbeck, 1945

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she and Steinbeck exchanged as enormously important to her during that terrible time.

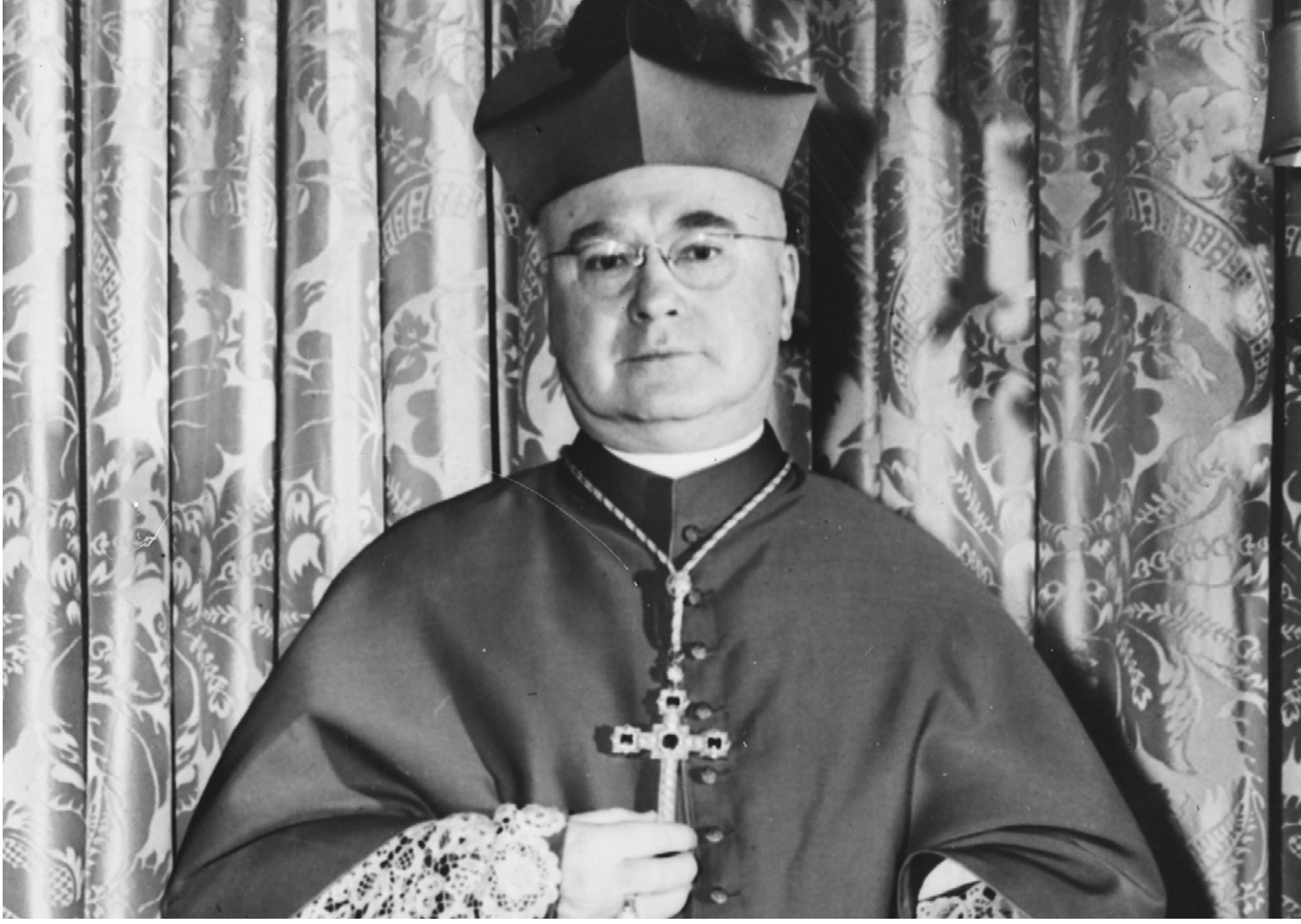
Steinbeck was moved deeply by Lyndon B. Johnson's commitment to eliminating poverty and to the Civil Rights struggle. After his "We Shall Overcome" speech to Congress in 1965, Steinbeck wrote him a stirring letter of gratitude and praise, to which LBJ responded: "Thousands of letters have come to me since my speech to the Congress. But none touched me or affected me to the degree yours did. Thank you, my dear friend. Thank you for your trust and your affection."

Although many derided Steinbeck in the 1960s for his support for the Vietnam war, some believe he may have been significantly influenced by his younger son's conversion to the cause of nonviolence after a tour of duty there. In spite of that son's association with disreputable "hippies" and his arrest for possession of marijuana, Steinbeck stood by him loyally. Certainly, in these letters he not only never disparages his son for his views, but also stands up for his right to express them.

The understated way in which Steinbeck learned about his Nobel Prize is perhaps my favorite part of this volume. It was at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis and he and his wife were at their holiday home in Sag Harbor. They turned on the television to hear how close the world was to nuclear annihilation and heard instead: "John Steinbeck has been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature."

Without having been forced to rest because of chikungunya, I don't know when I would have had the opportunity to be so totally immersed in these letters of a lifetime. I can't recommend the disease, but if you have a chance to read Steinbeck's letters, the experience will be both rich and rewarding.

JO MCGOWAN, *a longtime contributor to* Commonweal, *writes from Dehradun, India.*



Francis Spellman, 1946

Master Builders

PAUL BAUMANN

I recently spent too many hours plowing through John Cooney's four-hundred-page 1984 biography, *The American Pope: The Life and Times of Francis Cardinal Spellman*. Spellman was archbishop of New York from 1939 to 1967. He was notorious for his autocratic style and the power he exerted both inside and outside the Church. He was also known for his political conservatism, rabid anti-communism, American jingoism, unstinting support for the war in Vietnam, love of pomp, and financial acumen. He seems to have been almost a caricature of what Protestants long feared about Catholic clerical authoritarianism.

During his twenty-eight years of near-dictatorial rule in New York, the cardinal's residence became known as "The Powerhouse." He raised and spent hundreds of millions on new schools, churches, and hospitals. Mayors, governors, senators, and presidents paid homage. Spellman counted J. Edgar Hoover and Roy Cohn as friends and collaborators. He was an outspoken defender of Sen. Joseph McCarthy's red-baiting, and lent his support to Richard Nixon rather than John F. Kennedy in 1960. Although he was conventionally pious, he seems to have thought of himself more as the chief executive of a multimillion-dollar enterprise than as a spiritual leader. "Few people thought of him as a priest at all," according to the novelist and critic Wilfrid Sheed. Although Spellman apparently had a softer side in private, "he really was quite the bogeyman in public."

Spellman, a Massachusetts native and 1916 graduate of Rome's North American College, had little interest in theology and resisted Vatican II's reforms. "I hire theologians," he once said, dismissively. He campaigned to ban movies, such as Roberto Rossellini's *The Miracle*, that he judged blasphemous or obscene. When an article in *Commonweal* criticized such censorship, Spellman got the author fired from his teaching job at the University of Notre Dame. "Error has no rights" was his firm belief. In 1949 he used seminarians to break a strike by the diocesan's cemetery workers, falsely claiming their union was infiltrated by Communists. His famous feud with Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, once the most popular priest in America thanks to his TV program *Life is Worth Living*, was, predictably, about money, not theology. When Spellman

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lost that battle, he had Sheen exiled from New York City to upstate Rochester.

The liturgist Aidan Kavanagh, OSB, a former teacher of mine, wrote that "when Cardinal Spellman got dressed up to celebrate pontifical High Mass, it was eerily like watching the Infant of Prague come to life, but an Infant with whom it was advisable not to trifle." Spellman's visibility and authority was the embodiment of what made the pre–Vatican II Church so compelling for many. "It was *discipline*," Kavanagh wrote. "American Catholicism was a bit corrupt, somewhat crazy, and not a little magnificent."

Cooney's book, regarded as too gossipy by some, certainly explains the corrupt and crazy parts. The magnificence is probably best appreciated from a good distance, which was how most lay Catholics knew the cardinal. Cooney reminds us that much of that magnificence was tribal, born out of (mostly) Irish resentment and determination to forge secure footing in a still-Protestant America. Money paved the way. Spellman even made sure certain Catholic-owned department stores did not advertise in liberal newspapers he disagreed with.

My own interest in Spellman stems from the fact that my cousin, Msgr. William B. O'Brien—someone I met only three or four times—was one of "Spelly's boys." O'Brien was my father's age and as a young priest he worked at St. Patrick's Cathedral in the 1950s, a choice assignment for those Spellman regarded as future "managers." A staunch Republican, O'Brien was probably one of the seminarians Spellman used to break the gravedigger's strike. According to one of his close associates, my cousin modeled his priesthood, career, and management style after Spellman's.

O'Brien was a founder and long-time president of Daytop Village, the drug-rehabilitation program. Like Spellman, he could be an intimidating boss but was loved by the thousands who knew him as the face of Daytop. O'Brien insisted on the superiority of Daytop's approach to recovery, which involved rigorous discipline and a "tough love" approach. Addiction was a "character flaw," not a psychological problem. He did not tolerate dissent.

Daytop filed for bankruptcy in 2012, and O'Brien died in 2014 at the age of ninety. In 2019 he appeared on the Archdiocese of New York's list of priests "credibly accused" of sexual abuse. (Spellman was also posthumously accused of groping a West Point cadet.) I don't know what to make of the abuse accusation against O'Brien. No details will be revealed by the archdiocese. Even former Daytop staffers who were critical of O'Brien were skeptical of the charge. What still strikes me most about O'Brien is his Spellman-inspired cultivation of the famous and powerful, including Richard Nixon, Nancy Reagan, Pope John Paul II, and prominent figures from the world of entertainment and sports. Those endorsements helped him build what was once the largest drug-rehabilitation program in the country and Daytop's substantial real-estate holdings. Like Spellman, O'Brien seemed to think of himself as a business executive first and a priest second. Because of what he described as the cunning and ruthlessness of drug addicts, O'Brien told the *New York Times*, he had to "learn a hard discovery. I first had to deal with the human before I could go to the divine. Otherwise, I was building a house on sand." But what O'Brien built on classic American entrepreneurship and bluster also proved to have a sandy foundation.

In this, too, he was following Spellman's example. The enormous amount of money Spellman controlled and how he leveraged it to amass extraordinary authority in the American Church, the Vatican, and U.S. politics is still somewhat shocking. He worked in the Vatican from 1925 to 1932, where he learned how to influence prelates and pile up favors with money raised from wealthy American Catholics. He continued to funnel money to a financially desperate Vatican for the rest of his life. During those years in Rome, he became friends with Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, the future Pope Pius XII, greasing the slippery pole up the hierarchy. Spellman returned to the Boston archdiocese as an auxiliary bishop, much to the displeasure of Cardinal Archbishop William O'Connell, who detested Spellman and was determined to sabotage his advancement. When Pacelli became pope in 1939, he snubbed O'Connell again by naming Spellman archbishop of New York, the wealthiest and most powerful diocese in the country.

In Cooney's telling, scheming and backstabbing were endemic among clerics and hierarchs, both in Rome and America. Or, as the epigraph to his book notes, "Ambition is the ecclesiastical lust." When it came to appointing bishops and cardinals, Spellman spoke and Rome obeyed. If Spellman disagreed with the Vatican, as he did about the Vietnam war and U.S. hegemony more broadly, he tended to ignore his superiors.

It is useful to revisit Spellman's tenure now that so many conservative American Catholics are bemoaning the loss of clarity and unambiguous teaching under this pontificate. To be sure, under Spellman and his acolytes there was plenty of clarity and little ambiguity in what the Church taught and stood for. Just beneath the surface, however, vanity, corruption, and abuse flourished. Recent reports about ongoing scandals with Vatican finances suggest that not much has changed since Spellman was wheeling and dealing on both sides of the Atlantic. "A prince of the Church puts his soul at risk with every cornerstone," Wilfrid Sheed wrote of Spellman's need to woo the rich to build his ecclesiastical empire and keep the Vatican out of hock. My cousin had a similar relationship with cornerstones and real estate, which included Daytop's headquarters building overlooking Bryant Park and the New York Public Library in Midtown Manhattan, an asset eventually sold to pay Daytop's debts. The clear and unambiguous lesson of Church history is that a worldly magnificence is not to be trusted, and that honesty is more important than an air of certainty.

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

LETTER TO THE WOMAN TAKEN IN ADULTERY

Caleb Nolen

Confession wasn't what I imagined: I didn't kneel
before the shadowed priest. We met behind the sanctuary

in the room where they stored unused candles,
extra robes. *Backstage* is the word I kept thinking.

The priest gave a blessing, then I opened my notebook
and read everything I'd done out loud. Twenty-six years,

seven damning pages. He told me to destroy them,
to say a single Hail Mary as penance. I went out

and sat down in a pew. I said my prayer so slowly,
then there was nothing left to do. Is this how you felt

when the Lord said *go, and sin no more*? Did you want
something like those stones? There was still light

outside, a dim glow in the stained-glass windows.
I'm forgiven now, I said, and I tried very hard to feel it.

CALEB NOLEN *grew up in Pennsylvania and Maryland. He completed his MFA at the University of Virginia and has received support from Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and Blue Mountain Center. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in* 32 Poems, Fence, *the* Georgia Review, *and elsewhere.*

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