*Religion, Politics, Culture*

# Commonweal

MARCH 2022

## Tears & Ashes

**Vincent Miller on wildfires**

**PLUS**

**Andrew Bacevich on** Ukraine

**Shaun Blanchard on** doctrinal reform

**A short story by** Rand Richards Cooper

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# The Church of Now:
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### May 6-8, 2022 • Online via Zoom

This international conference recognizes that young people are not just the Church of the future; as Pope Francis said in 2019, in *Christus Vivit*, they " are not merely on the receiving end of pastoral activity: they are living members of the one ecclesial body." The whole Church needs to find new ways to listen to and empower young people. To that end, this conference brings together scholars and activists from Indonesia, Nigeria, India, Brazil, Burundi, Central African Republic, China, Mexico, the Philippines, Uganda, Switzerland, and the United States to address questions of

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# Commonweal

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**COVER IMAGE**
*"Standing, Still. #3."*
Finn Rock Reach, Oregon, 2021.
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*David Sankey*

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# LETTERS

## *What's next for Ukraine?*

### BOTH SIDES?

Your editorial "The Standoff in Ukraine" (January) examines Putin's aggression from the perspectives of various stakeholders: the Biden administration, critics of the Biden administration, Russia, Putin, Western Europe, and others. One perspective is conspicuously absent from your analysis: that of the Ukrainian people.

To be clear, a significant majority of the Ukrainian people are in favor of joining NATO, and an even larger percentage seek to join the EU and strongly oppose the creation of a federal Ukrainian state. Yet you would have the Ukrainian people accede to Putin's demands—as a reward for his belligerence?

The desire of the Ukrainian people is simple: to live in a country with a healthy civil society that promotes the rule of law and values individual human life. It has a way to go on this path, to be sure, but a vibrant Ukrainian state that respects the individual and the rule of law scares Putin much more than NATO. And that's why he invaded Crimea and the Donbas. Your article directs the United States to be "clear and firm to both sides of this conflict," implying, like Trump in Charlottesville, that there is moral ambiguity here. There is not.

*Taras G. Szmagala Jr.*
*Bentleyville, Ohio*

### KYIV, NOT KIEV

Thank you for highlighting the situation in Ukraine. The country is facing an existential moment as Russia surrounds it with a massive military force armed to the teeth. However, I am disappointed with your woefully inadequate understanding of what is at stake. Your position seems to imply that Ukraine, as the victim of an assault, should be required to negotiate with the aggressor—Russia! Furthermore, as if to add insult to injury, you continue to use the obsolete Russian name of Ukraine's capital—it is Kyiv, not Kiev. Most media have already accepted Kyiv as the proper name.

*Jurij Dobczansky*
*Silver Spring, Md.*

### THE ACTION IS HERE

I enjoyed reading Rita Ferrone's article ("Where the Action Is," January); it explains a lot for me. But I am puzzled by its omission of the ministry of Eucharistic minister. This ministry—both by aiding at the distribution of Communion and, especially, by going out to the homebound—is for me the ultimate example of the changing performance of ministry in the Church.

The article emphasizes at its conclusion that "The liturgy both draws us in and sends us out." The Eucharistic minister to the homebound is already doing this. My wife and I have long performed this ministry as a couple. Both of us and the recipients experience so wonderfully the fulfillment of "wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." I wish the article had included this ministry—I would like to know more about how it developed.

*Tom Eichler*
*Venice, Fla.*

### THE EDUCATION WE NEED

As a citizen and business educator, I believe that America needs to reform education to counter "neoclassical economics" and its presumptions and practices, which Anthony Annett criticizes in his article "The Fallen Idol" (January). A prerequisite for a "policy roadmap heavily influenced by the values of Catholic social teaching" and "prescriptions [that] can be embraced by Catholics and non-Catholics alike" is education, especially university education. But what kind of education is being called for?

We need education that goes beyond the wisdom of Enlightenment thinkers to classical and medieval thought to

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# LETTERS

address the crisis of modern liberalism created by America's addiction to neoliberalism, which is little more than an extension or a variation of neoclassical economics. Regardless of what it is called now—consumer, financial, or fintech capitalism—we cannot fundamentally address the ills of capitalism unless we abandon the neoclassical economic education that views human society as an organization of rational agents who act to maximize their wealth. Through education, human thinking should be oriented to the primacy of being over having.

More specifically, we should teach our students to understand that 1) things can have value, but only persons can have worth; 2) collective is a collection of things and people in a region of space; community is the existence of persons recognizing one another as persons having dignity, with emotional and ethical relationships; 3) well-being has the conception of goodness and virtue (both moral and intellectual virtue) as constituents; wealth means possession of valued things; 4) humans are beings that claim freedom and autonomy and hold responsibility for their thoughts, intentions, and actions.

But a serious question remains in my mind: Is the education just described feasible in America's current, predominantly corporatized universities that seem to have become handmaidens of the market while preaching lofty ideals?

*Yeomin Yoon*
*Stillman School of Business*
*Seton Hall University*
*South Orange, N.J.*

## COMMUNITY WITHOUT INTIMACY

In "Opening to the World" (February), an excerpt from a forthcoming memoir that I'm looking forward to reading in its entirety, Luke Timothy Johnson speaks of his "awakening desire for intimacy" in tension with his "punctilious observance" of the monastic rules.

Community without intimacy was one reason my husband gave for leaving his monastic community to marry me. He had entered monastic life weeks after graduation from college. Ten years later, when we met, I was a twenty-nine-year-old widow searching for community. Fortunately, his monastic community supported both of us as our lives "exploded," to borrow Professor Johnson's metaphor.

*Gail Porter Mandell*
*Humanistic Studies Program*
*Saint Mary's College*
*Notre Dame, Ind.*

# Covid, Two Years Later

As of late February Covid had killed more than 930,000 Americans in two years. With two thousand people still perishing daily, the total is likely to pass 1 million sometime this spring. The death rate is higher in the United States than in any other wealthy country, and its vaccination rate is among the lowest. These facts are not unconnected: Omicron may be a milder variant of the virus, but more people have died in the past three months than in all of last winter's wave—the vast majority of them unvaccinated.

There are many reasons people choose not to get a vaccine, from anxiety to inconvenience to genuine moral or ethical concerns about medical treatment. But what cannot be denied is the role that right-wing politicians and media outlets have played in holding the numbers down—by spreading disinformation about vaccines, vociferously protesting mandates, attacking the medical science behind vaccinations, and making opposition to vaccines a marker of partisan political loyalty. Nor should we overlook the role of religious leaders and influencers who joined the effort to discredit the Covid vaccines. This cynical campaign has had its predictable effect: only about 60 percent of Republicans are vaccinated, compared with more than 90 percent of Democrats, and the rate of Covid cases and deaths in states and counties that vote Republican far exceeds the rate in those that vote Democrat. Some say the high rate of infection in those areas may lead to herd immunity, but if that's the case it will have come at great cost: many thousands of needlessly lost lives.

In March 2020, we wrote that the pandemic would challenge how we live in society with one another. We said it would further expose the inadequacies of our health-care system and the inequities of our economy. And we expressed hope for collective action and sacrifice. What actually happened speaks for itself. It is impossible to go back and undo the many mistakes that made the pandemic worse than it needed to be in the United States. Still, it's natural to wonder what might have been different had the country been led at the time by a president who sought to build solidarity instead of one who deliberately stoked division and dysfunction—one who declared, "I don't take responsibility at all" for the nation's disastrous response to the crisis, and one who exhorted armed protestors in Michigan and elsewhere to "liberate" states that had enacted measures to slow the spread of the virus. Donald Trump's poisoning of the country's already weakened body politic not only exacerbated the greatest health crisis since the influenza pandemic a century ago, but also helped legitimize behavior that could destabilize American society for years.

Joe Biden faced an uphill climb when he took office in January 2021, and he arrived promising the calm leadership and competence many Americans were seeking. Unfortunately, far more deaths have occurred on his watch. The administration still seems several steps behind on managing the pandemic. Only after the new year did the federal government implement a comprehensive plan for delivering in-home test kits, something that could and should have been done much sooner. The performance of the Centers for Disease Control continues to puzzle. It has been slow to release data on testing and boosters that could help states and municipalities respond to spikes in cases. Guidance on masking and other preventive measures has been inconsistent and confusing. Now, even as many blue states relax restrictions and Americans declare themselves "done with Covid," new cases still average close to 100,000 per day, and President Biden has had to extend the national emergency declared at the outset of the pandemic in 2020.

At this point, weariness, frustration, and anger are understandable. But that shouldn't be an excuse to breezily declare ourselves "done" with Covid. Here it might be helpful to recall the flu pandemic of 1918. After two years, three waves, and millions of deaths, Americans grew tired of measures meant to contain the virus and disregarded government recommendations. Then, in 1920, came a fourth wave that killed many thousands more. We can hope that, like the flu, Covid will eventually become endemic, a virus both manageable and treatable. But as long as people all around the world remain unvaccinated, new and possibly more lethal variants will continue to emerge.

Vigilance will help, not hinder, the return to normalcy. Moving from controls and restrictions to preparation, containment, and recovery means implementing lessons learned over the past two years. There needs to be better monitoring of variants and faster approval and distribution of new treatments. We need to ensure the manufacture and availability of test kits, ventilators, and personal protective equipment. We need to address the deficiencies in our health-care system that put so many vulnerable people—the elderly, the poor, the immunocompromised—at such high risk. We must also offer federal paid sick leave (the United States is the only wealthy country that doesn't already do so) and other benefits aimed at keeping businesses and schools open and helping workers recover from illness without losing a paycheck. All of these things are doable. What might be harder is restoring the social cohesion needed to deal with the next public-health crisis—for this will not be the last.

# The Pillage of Afghanistan

On February 11, President Joe Biden signed an executive order allocating the funds of the Afghanistan central bank that are frozen in the United States. The money—about $7 billion—was seized by the U.S. government when the Taliban took over Afghanistan in August and is currently held at the New York Federal Reserve Bank. Biden's executive order splits the funds roughly in half: one part goes to fund potential payouts to families of 9/11 victims who have brought cases against the Taliban; the rest is to be put in a trust "for the benefit of the Afghan people."

In the past several months, the people of Afghanistan have been facing what may be the worst humanitarian disaster in the world: 23 million people—over half the population—endure conditions of extreme hunger, and a million children under five are at risk of death by starvation. The proximate cause of the devastation is a crop failure, but that wouldn't have caused nearly as much harm without the total collapse of Afghanistan's economy, which was caused by our seizure of its government's funds and the restrictions Washington placed on foreign aid to the country.

International aid organizations are strongly opposed to the decision. They insist that the money belongs to the Afghan people, and that the United States has no right to decide what to do with it. But others say the United States must try to keep the funds out of the hands of the Taliban government, which could use it to secure their oppressive regime. Writing in *Foreign Policy*, Charli Carpenter argues that putting the money in a trust for Afghanistan could have been a reasonable step toward getting it back to its rightful owners while keeping it away from the Taliban. But that wouldn't address the current emergency. Afghanistan needs money now to stabilize its economy, and this can't be done through piecemeal disbursements or even well-administered aid.

Carpenter claims that the other half of Biden's order—the use of Afghanistan's funds to compensate 9/11 victims—would constitute "pillage—an international war crime." As the *Washington Post*'s editors point out in an otherwise flawed editorial, there is an "apparent tension" in the executive order: "It does not consider the money as the Taliban's, except, implicitly, to the extent it can be used for compensating the Sept. 11 victims." That tension is more than just "apparent." In effect, the order punishes ordinary Afghans for crimes committed by Al Qaeda and siphons off the country's wealth as they attempt to recover from a twenty-year occupation by the United States.

There are alternatives to this pillage. Carpenter lays out a few of them: identifying a "government-in-exile" to administer the funds, as was done for Eastern European countries after World War II, or working with the Taliban government to administer the funds while maintaining sanctions on individual Taliban leaders. Perhaps the best option would be to work with the World Bank and the United Nations to get money directly into Afghans' bank accounts so that they can buy their own food. This could save millions of lives.

Any of these options would be better than continuing to sit on the wealth of an entire country in which 95 percent of its population doesn't have enough food to eat. As 125 Afghan women leaders wrote in an open letter to Biden, "Taking funds from the Afghan people is the unkindest and most inappropriate response to a country that is going through the worst humanitarian crisis in its history. It is the squeezing of a wounded hand."

*—Regina Munch*

# A Catholic Politics?

Last September, I got an email from *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat. It was an invitation to participate in a panel discussion with him and Matthew Walther at the Institute for Human Ecology at the Catholic University of America. Walther, a columnist for the *American Conservative* and editor of the *Lamp*, had recently written a piece for the *Times* titled "This Is Why America Needs Catholicism." The proposed discussion would focus on the possibility of a "Catholic politics" in the United States.

I am an admirer of Douthat's work, and eagerly accepted the invitation. I had found Walther's piece, which argued that Catholic social teaching's economic moderation and social conservatism could bridge our current political divisions, idiosyncratic and idealistic. His plea—that Americans "set aside the standard ideological divisions of coalition politics in an attempt to apply the full range of the church's social teaching to the problems of modern life"—had an undeniable *Commonweal* ring to it. But his commitment, as expressed in the *Lamp,* to "undiluted" and "immutable" Catholic orthodoxy naturally raised a measure of skepticism.

At the event, I noted that Walther's call for a vigorous engagement between the Church and American society mirrored *Commonweal*'s own mission statement, now nearly one hundred years old: "The editors of *Commonweal* believe that nothing can do so much for the betterment, the happiness, and the peace of the American people as the influence of the enduring and tested principles of Catholic Christianity." But I cautioned that there is an abiding tension—one Walther seemed to ignore—between Church teaching and American liberal democracy.

Walther began his own remarks by observing that the popes had been "right about everything, every time." He claimed that only the Church had

spoken for solidarity between the two World Wars. And no one else, he argued, had understood the malevolence of the "technocratic liberal paradigm," made manifest by artificial contraception.

I didn't know quite what to make of the claim that the Church was alone in speaking out for solidarity in the last century. It is widely acknowledged that the Vatican's resistance to liberal democracy and its alliance with monarchies and autocracies did a great deal to alienate the industrial working classes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the time, Catholicism's notion of solidarity was inseparable from its embrace of an inherited social and economic order—and when push came to shove, it usually chose hierarchy over solidarity.

Obviously, there is a strong element of romanticism in Walther's social criticism, but I left the event puzzled about his actual politics. Not long after our panel discussion, he published a piece in the *Atlantic* titled "Where I Live, No One Cares About COVID." When it came to the pandemic, folks in Walther's part of Michigan were unfazed. "I don't know how to put this in a way that will not make me sound flippant," he wrote flippantly, "but no one cares…. Outside the world inhabited by the professional and managerial classes in a handful of major metropolitan areas, many, if not most, Americans are leading their lives as if COVID is over, and they have been for a long time." Sure, there have been inconveniences. When public Masses were suspended, Walther and his family had to settle for praying the rosary at home. But fear of Covid is the obsession of elites, the same folks who like to impose restrictions on pregnant women drinking alcohol or "eating crudos or *kibbeh nayyeh*."

Thirty-four thousand people have died from Covid in Michigan. Walther and his friends are indeed lucky not to have been touched by the disease. But if this approach to the common good is what an immutable and undiluted Catholic politics looks like, it is the last thing America needs.

*—Paul Baumann*

## 'Forever Chemicals'

Since the new year, elevated levels of toxic chemicals have been found in beef sold to schools in Michigan, in the drinking water of several New Hampshire towns, and even in the produce from organic farms in Maine. All belong to a class of compounds called per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS. These "forever chemicals" were first manufactured in the 1940s, and gained popularity for their water- and grease-repellent properties. They do not break down naturally. Instead, they accumulate—in water, soil, animals, and people.

PFAS bioaccumulation has been linked to several types of cancer, liver damage, birth defects, and weakened immune response. Manufacturers have so far thwarted regulatory efforts by using tricks that seem to be pulled straight from the Big-Tobacco playbook: they withhold in-house studies that warn of their products' risks; fund research that downplays the chemicals' danger; or replace specific PFAS with others that are ostensibly safer but haven't been rigorously tested, and often turn out to be just as dangerous. This strategy works because, according to independent researchers and the Environmental Defense Fund, the Federal Drug Administration "does not demand sufficient safety data up front and [has] no systematic reassessment to determine whether chemicals are safe after they are sent to the market."

Chemours, the company that operates the Fayetteville Works plant in North Carolina, serves as a striking example. It claimed that its GenX PFAS was a safer alternative to the plant's previous product, PFOA. But as the chemical contaminated drinking water and spilled into the Cape Fear River, it became clear that not only was Chemours misrepresenting GenX's toxicity, but also the company's ability to keep it contained. Spun off from chemical giant DuPont in 2015, Chemours claims it bears no responsibility because the contamination precedes its existence. Meanwhile, DuPont claims that Chemours assumed all liability for Fayetteville Works when the company was established. A suit brought by the North Carolina attorney general to make both companies pay to clean up the pollution is still in progress. But cleaning up the pollution is no simple matter—these are, after all, "forever chemicals." Disseminated via biosolid fertilizer (fertilizer created from wastewater sludge), they remain in the soil for decades, as they did at the contaminated organic farm in Maine and the beef farm in Michigan. And the contamination has become so widespread that it's hard to keep up with just how much harm these chemicals may be doing. A New Hampshire attorney suing PFAS-manufacturer Saint-Gobain said that "the more these PFAS manufacturers contaminate the planet, the more difficult it is to do effective human health studies, as there are fewer and fewer 'uncontaminated' populations to compare to."

The latest technology emerging to address PFAS uses a heat- and pressure-based technique called supercritical water oxidation with promising results, but it isn't ready for large-scale use. On the federal level, EPA administrator Michael Regan—who previously worked in North Carolina and saw the Cape Fear River disaster firsthand—introduced a "PFAS Strategic Roadmap" in October 2021, signaling a new commitment to researching, restricting, and remediating damage from the compounds over the next three years. And the bipartisan infrastructure bill passed last year dedicates $10 billion to cleaning up contaminants. But these measures could still be hamstrung by companies that know how to game the regulatory process. Rather than just trying to hold chemical manufacturers accountable for the devastating impacts of their products, we should act to prevent them from inflicting such damage in the first place.

*—Isabella Simon*

MOLLIE WILSON O'REILLY

# When Abortion Isn't Abortion

Pro-life slogans are simple, but women's needs aren't.


JEFFREY ISAAC GREENBERG 3+/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Like most Catholics in the post–*Roe v. Wade* generation, I grew up hearing very little about miscarriages and a great deal about abortion. I thought I knew what abortion meant: abortion is murder; abortion stops a beating heart; abortion is a mortal sin. I did *not* know that, in medical terms, a miscarriage is a "spontaneous abortion." When my first pregnancy ended, I was stunned to see the word "abortion" in my medical file. There I was, a woman who would never consider "having an abortion," and yet somehow, very much in spite of myself, I already had.

If you bring up the matter of medical terminology in a debate about abortion restrictions, you may be accused of muddying the waters with semantics. Pro-lifers will tell you that of course they know the difference between abortion and natural pregnancy loss. But where the moral difference between choosing to end a life and suffering an unintended loss may be clear, the practical, legal, and medical realities overlap in complicated ways. I have learned over the course of six pregnancies and four births how inadequate pro-life rhetoric can be, and how lonely it is to find yourself in a place beyond the reach of slogans like "Choose life!" The awful irony of restrictions on abortion is the way they put up barriers to basic health care, barriers that can be dangerous for women whose experience of pregnancy is not a smooth path to motherhood.

My sixth pregnancy, like my first, ended in a miscarriage—a fact I learned from an ultrasound exam, which classified the loss as a "missed abortion." Three weeks later I was in the emergency room seeking treatment for what is known as an "incomplete abortion." By that time, seeing the word "abortion" in my records no longer frightened me, but the reality very much did. I was admitted to the hospital with heavy bleeding, and ultimately I underwent a D&C, which activists can tell you is a procedure used to terminate a pregnancy. In my case, it was necessary to stop the hemorrhage that had sent me into shock.

Morally, my situation was straightforward. Medically, it was a crisis requiring immediate intervention. And legally, in New York, nothing prevented me from getting the care that saved my life. But when I woke up in the maternity ward, thinking over the traumatic events of that night, I wondered whether a woman in my situation in a state with restrictive abortion laws would have been so fortunate. My survival depended on the availability of a doctor who was able and willing to perform an abortion procedure. It is not hard to imagine the situation turning out differently in a state with more "pro-life" laws regulating care. What if that doctor hadn't been trained? What if she was afraid to get involved? What if someone else needed to approve the procedure

before the hospital could carry it out? What if I ran out of time?

I don't think it occurs to most pro-life voters that the same procedures that can end a growing pregnancy can also save a life, and that enacting restrictions on abortion could mean withholding care from mothers whose lives are in danger. Appealing to "the health of the mother" is not just a pro-choice dodge, as many pro-lifers would have you believe. As a mother and as a woman, I am chilled by the heartlessness of slogans like "Pregnancy is not a disease," which the U.S. bishops conference relied on in 2011 in opposing mandated coverage for birth control. I know better than any bishop what it's like to bring life into the world. And I know pregnancy doesn't always end in a blessing. I didn't end up in the ER because I failed to appreciate the inestimable gift of life. I ended up there because a natural complication of pregnancy nearly killed me. That fact, and the fact that birth control is the obvious way to prevent a repeat of that experience, is inconvenient for the Catholic pro-life position. It gets brushed aside, and women like me find ourselves feeling disposable to a movement that claims to defend our dignity.

That night in the hospital, praying, I felt sustained by my faith, but abandoned by my Church. I came out grateful to the doctors and nurses who saved me and more alienated than ever from the pro-life movement, which I now saw as ready to sacrifice women's real needs for a clearer path to political victory.

I am still a woman who would not choose to have an abortion. I am also a woman who owes her life to accessible reproductive care. I don't know yet what it will take to repair my relationship with the Church. But I do know my conscience won't allow me to support laws or politicians that threaten women's health care. Respect for every life is an ideal I embrace. But I've finally recognized that the pro-life movement, with all its good intentions, isn't on my side.

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

A service member of the Ukrainian armed forces in the Donetsk region of Ukraine, January 25, 2022

CNS PHOTO/MAKSIM LEVIN, REUTERS

ANDREW BACEVICH

# A Mournful Legacy

## Ukraine and the recovery of moral realism

A half-century ago this year, journalist David Halberstam published *The Best and the Brightest*, his massive and influential account of America's war in Vietnam. Filled with scathing judgments of the chief dramatis personae, the book remains eminently entertaining. Read against the backdrop of the present-day crisis in Ukraine, it retains considerable relevance. Despite the decades that have passed since it first appeared, it's a book that President Joe Biden would do well to check out of his local library.

At one level, U.S. policy regarding Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s and the ongoing contretemps regarding Ukraine have nothing to do with one another. But look closer, and similarities emerge—as well as warnings about our present situation.

The Vietnam War was neither the first nor the only crisis that the United States has confronted since donning the mantle of global leadership. But in terms of horrors inflicted and damage sustained, that particular misadventure occupies a category all its own. Halberstam's account describes how senior U.S. officials talked themselves into classifying the Republic of Vietnam as a vital national interest, its survival a cause for which young Americans should be willing to fight and die.

Those who advised Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson were smart and ambitious, impeccably educated, tested by their own service in World War II, and eager to lead the nation at a moment of seemingly maximum peril. By their own lights, they were tough-minded pragmatists, given to seeing things as they actually were, without ideological blinders. On that score, Halberstam shows otherwise. In fact, the Vietnam War offers a textbook example of what happens when a political elite abandons moral realism in favor of fantasy.

In Cold War Washington, through the 1950s and 1960s, the governing fantasy centered on a conviction that "monolithic communism" directed by aging revolutionaries in the Kremlin posed a direct threat to freedom everywhere, not least of all in the United States. Halberstam's book appeared during the very year that Richard Nixon made his famous trip to China. With that event, the myth of monolithic communism collapsed. Halberstam shows that as early as 1961, members of the U.S. national-security elite had known full well about the Sino-Soviet split. But for bureaucratic and domestic political reasons, they found it expedient to ignore its implications. One result was the Vietnam War, fought because, according to the specious "domino theory," Communist victory there would ostensibly put America itself at risk.

In fact, to the extent that we can trace the roots of our present-day malaise and disunion back to the 1960s, we might conclude that the Vietnam War actually served to undermine rather than to uphold American freedom. Even today, the mournful consequences of that war linger. By that measure, the legacy of the best-and-brightest lives on.

In the decades since, this absence of moral realism has become something of a signature of U.S. policy. For evi-

dence, we need look no further than the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), undertaken by members of an elite fancying themselves infinitely smarter than, say, McGeorge Bundy or Robert McNamara (who figure prominently in Halberstam's account), but who are actually cut from the same cloth. Governed by their own fantasies, the likes of Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz wildly misconstrued actual U.S. interests after 9/11 and expended American power on a prodigious scale without purpose. They too have left behind a mournful legacy, not only in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, but also among our own increasingly demoralized and alienated fellow citizens.

Today it has fallen to a new generation of highly credentialed officials to address a different problem set, with the Ukraine crisis a prominent example. Sadly, however, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and national security adviser Jake Sullivan seem intent on reviving the tradition of Bundy and McNamara, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz. At the heart of that tradition is an inability to gauge actual U.S. interests combined with exaggerated expectations of what American power and influence can achieve. This defines the very opposite of moral realism, which seeks to maintain at least a rough equilibrium between purpose and power, while recognizing that others may have legitimate interests that differ from those of the United States. That last point is of crucial importance.

The Ukraine crisis and the resulting standoff with Russia offer a case in point. As was the case with Vietnam and the principal theaters of the GWOT, Ukraine does not constitute a vital U.S. security interest. From an American perspective, it is not worth fighting for, as President Biden himself has tacitly admitted. That Russians should entertain a different view regarding Ukraine's strategic importance is not only unsurprising but to be expected. Thousands of miles from the United States, Ukraine borders on Russia. In geopolitics, propinquity confers strategic importance.

Given this context, Ukraine's expressed ambition to join NATO, dating from 2008, necessarily appears in Russian eyes to be a hostile act, as would, say, Mexico dropping hints that it seeks to forge a military alliance with the People's Republic of China. In 1997, the renowned diplomat and historian George Kennan warned that expanding NATO at Russia's expense would be "the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era." Successive administrations chose to ignore that warning, which proved to be remarkably prescient. The truth is that when Russia was weak, the United States and its European allies exploited that weakness to the West's advantage. They should not expect gratitude from the Kremlin.

Claims by the United States that its intentions regarding Ukraine are benign will ring hollow to anyone recalling Washington's recent appetite for aggressive military action. One need not—and should not—give Russia a pass for its 2008 punitive skirmish with Georgia, its 2014 annexation of Crimea, and its incursion into Ukraine's Donbas region the same year. Neither, however, should we expect adversaries to overlook U.S. military actions undertaken with even less legal justification and even sketchier strategic logic, which resulted in far greater loss of life. If the Russian troop presence along the perimeter of Ukraine and the Kremlin's partial dismemberment of that country is a provocation, then how should we characterize the conduct and outcome of America's invasion and twenty-year occupation of Afghanistan?

The sins committed by great powers abound, a truth as applicable to our era as to any other. The task immediately at hand is not to weigh American transgressions against Russia's but to limit the resultant damage. Regarding Ukraine, the imperative is to devise a formula that will restore a semblance of stability to a region now seemingly teetering on the brink of needless war. In that regard, the approach favored by Bundy and McNamara, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz won't do.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has advanced a set of large demands that translate into a comprehensive set of security guarantees; for example, permanently foreclosing the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO. In effect, Putin appears intent on declaring an end to the period when Russia could be pushed around. While in some respects his demands may be excessive, moral realism requires that Biden refrain from dismissing them out of hand.

My Quincy Institute colleague Anatol Lieven had devised a plausible solution to the conundrum: neutralization, using Cold War Austria as a model. In the immediate wake of World War II, the victorious allies occupied Austria, and arrangements there paralleled the terms of the occupation of defeated Germany. In 1955, however, the occupiers, including the United States and the Soviet Union, negotiated a treaty that resulted in Austria's neutralization along with the withdrawal of all foreign forces. Austria thereby became a buffer between East and West, an outcome agreeable to all parties, not least of all to Austrians.

Moral realism suggests the possibility of a similar outcome for Ukraine: neutralization to transform it into a buffer between Russia and NATO while providing for the essential security and well-being of the Ukrainian people. A perfect solution? No, and hawkish critics will scream appeasement. But such an outcome will be infinitely preferable to a major (and potentially nuclear) armed conflict or to Ukraine's remaining a perpetual flashpoint.

And let's face it: given the precarious state of their own democracy, Americans today have more pressing concerns to deal with than Eastern European border security. Restoring a modicum of moral realism to U.S. policy will mark a large step toward giving those concerns the attention they deserve.

*—February 23, 2022*

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ELIZABETH M. LYNCH

# A Threat to Justice Everywhere

The world must act now to save China's persecuted Uyghur minority.

Early last December, a group of nine British lawyers and human-rights specialists gathered in a wood-paneled room under the glass dome of Church House, near Westminster Abbey in downtown London. They were there to do what the United Nations and its member states have so far failed to accomplish: conduct a thorough review of five years of evidence regarding the Chinese government's persecution of its minority Muslim Uyghur population in the province of Xinjiang, a sprawling semi-autonomous territory in northwest China. On December 9, after hearing days' worth of live testimony and poring over thousands of pages of expert reports, as well as published regulations of the Chinese government and other leaked documents, the independent Uyghur Tribunal pronounced its verdict. It found the Chinese government guilty of crimes against humanity and genocide of its Uyghur population.

Such an important determination should not have taken this long, nor should the judgment have fallen to a people's court. Since 2017 the world has known—through media reports, academic studies, and witness testimony—that the Chinese government has summarily interned more than 1 million Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang concentration camps. Detainees are routinely denied due process: no charges are brought, no criminal trials held, no sentences meted out. Initially, the Chinese government denied the camps' existence. It only began acknowledging them in 2019, euphemistically referring to them as "vocational education and training centers."

To some extent, Chinese media has managed to conceal the horrors that take place inside the internment camps. That leaves it to reports authored by Westerners, like anthropologist and Uyghur expert Darren Byler's *In the Camps*, to fill in the gaps. No matter the site, survivor after survivor recounts the same abuse and degradation. Authorities often cram up to fifty Uyghurs into tiny cells measuring only 250 square feet; their occupants


Uyghur children in Germany protesting the so-called "Muslim crackdown" by the Chinese Communist Party in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region of China, February 2, 2019

ZUMA PRESS, INC./ALAMY LIVE NEWS

are forced to relieve themselves publicly in a single bucket, which is cleaned just once a week. Cellmates are also forbidden from speaking to each other. Instead, they're encouraged to report on those who fail to speak Mandarin, attempt to practice their Muslim religion, or "criticize themselves" insufficiently.

Beatings and other forms of torture are common. According to Byler, constant bright lights prevent some Uyghurs from sleeping, while guards force others to "perform" for their food, "like contestants in a demented reality show." Accounts of rape, sexual violence, and forced sterilization have emerged, and forced labor is systemic. Because there are no legal proceedings governing their stay in the camps, detainees often spend months, even years there, all without any idea of when (or if) they will ever be released.

Even after they leave the camps, Uyghurs remain unfree. The police hold on to their biometric data, and continue collecting more information through China's ubiquitous facial-recognition cameras and tracking programs installed on cell phones. Sophisticated algorithms known as the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP) constantly parse all this data, flagging anyone suspected of "untrustworthy" behavior for further investigation and possible arrest. This can include such innocuous actions as following certain accounts on social media, using a virtual private network to access the internet, or receiving phone calls from abroad. The end result is that the algorithm, a form of artificial intelligence, increasingly learns to target Uyghurs simply for being Uyghur.

An even more common justification for detaining Uyghurs in detention centers is "excess births," which the Chinese government considers a form of "extremism." In 2017, Xinjiang abolished a legal exception that had permitted Uyghur families to have additional children compared with their Han counterparts. In 2017 and 2018, sterilization procedures surged in Xinjiang, even as these procedures plummeted throughout the rest of China. (Beijing suspended its infamous one-child policy in 2015.) Removal of a surgically-placed IUD requires state approval; if a Uyghur woman protests, she is threatened with detention.

Such measures have been grimly effective. In 2019, birth rates dropped by 48.7 percent in Xinjiang Province as a whole compared to 2017. In areas of the province that are predominantly Uyghur, like Hotan, birth rates dropped by more than 70 percent. In majority-Han areas in Xinjiang, though, birth rates either remained the same or increased slightly. Ironically, this comes as China finds itself in the midst of a demographic crisis, with the Chinese government now pressuring Han women to have more babies.

The Chinese government has defended these policies as necessary for ridding Xinjiang of Muslim extremism. Yet it has provided scant evidence of what it claims is a widespread problem. The 2009 riots in Xinjiang that left 137 Han Chinese and 46 Uyghurs dead was not caused, as China claims, by a rise in Islamic extremism among Uyghurs. It was instead the predictable result of the Uyghurs' frustration at being treated as second-class-citizens, occasioned by the massive influx of Han Chinese to the province the previous decade. The same goes for the two suicide attacks and an incident of mass violence at the Kunming train station that killed thirty-one people in 2013 and 2014. Even if we accept the Chinese government's assertion that the attacks were carried out by Uyghur independence movements, that doesn't justify mass internment camps or genocidal policies. As it did after the 2009 riots, China effectively dealt with the 2013 and 2014 killings through its criminal-justice system, with the leading perpetrators sentenced either to life in prison or given the death penalty.

Much of the blame for China's extralegal tactics against the Uyghurs can be assigned to President Xi Jinping, who took office in 2013. In a series of secret speeches given to senior-level Chinese Communist Party members in 2014 and recently leaked to the Uyghur Tribunal, Xi set the tone for the extraordinary measures we see today. "The key is to eliminate them in the bud," he said. "Act first to restrain the enemies, crack down early, crack down on the small ones, crack down on the emerging ones. Destroy them with lightning speed and an iron-fist approach."

Such rhetoric could have dire consequences. As genocide expert and Global Justice Center president Akila Radhakrishnan reminded an audience at a recent conference, mass murder does not happen overnight. Societies must be primed to tolerate genocide. In Rwanda, for example, ten months of hateful radio broadcasts preceded the Tutsi genocide. And during the Holocaust, 6 million Jews were sent to their deaths after eight years of increasingly discriminatory laws. "If this type of discrimination is tolerated," Radhakrishnan added, "these can be the building blocks that allows massive outbursts of violence to happen."

The same is true in Xinjiang today, where these building blocks of mass murder have been automated. The particular cruelty of surveillance technology is that it is purposely built to dehumanize, severing what little relationship might exist between captor and captive, blocking any possibility of compassion. The algorithm "confirms" that those whose rights are denied must deserve it. And surely the computer cannot be wrong.

This is why it is imperative that the U.N. and its member states act now. It's no hyperbole to say that the Uyghur ethnicity is on the brink of annihilation. Yet thus far, the U.N. has done little to condemn the Chinese government's actions. This is in part because the Chinese government has denied the U.N. high commissioner of human rights the ability to conduct an independent fact-finding mission in Xinjiang. But the U.N. has worked around such situations in the past, most notably when it issued findings of crimes against humanity in North Korea in 2013. The U.N. high commissioner, through the Human Rights Council, could appoint a commission of inquiry to investigate and report on the situation in Xinjiang. The high commissioner has been prom-

ising such a report since last September. But as of today, it remains unpublished.

The United States, which has done more than most countries, can also do better. Last December, Congress passed and President Joe Biden signed into law the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, which blocks goods made with forced labor in Xinjiang from entering U.S. markets. But this doesn't address the issue of the torture and degradation of Uyghurs in the concentration camps. Nor will it stop the forced sterilization of Uyghur women and the rapid decline in Uyghur births, the key mechanism of the ongoing genocide in Xinjiang. Despite President Biden reiterating that China is committing genocide, the United States has not admitted a single Uyghur refugee in more than a year.

One thing the United States can do immediately is to designate Uyghurs and other Chinese Turkic Muslims as Priority 2 ("P-2 status") refugees. This would enable them to bypass the long, drawn-out process of proving individual persecution before applying for resettlement in the United States. It would also allow them to apply for asylum from anywhere in the world. There are bills before both houses of Congress that would provide this P-2 status, but both have been stalled since their introduction last spring. President Biden, who could also designate P-2 status for Uyghurs under the Refugee Act of 1980—much like he did for Afghan refugees last August—seems unlikely to do so.

Almost monthly, social media explodes with stories of Uyghur refugees who managed to escape China, but are now stuck in Eastern Europe or Central Asia. They remain there in a kind of legal limbo, at the mercy of countries whom the Chinese government regularly pressures for repatriation. Their safety should not depend on advocates picking up their cases through Twitter. So why won't the international community act?

The answer is simple: China is immensely powerful, and many countries depend on its cooperation for trade or to achieve other priorities like fighting climate change. Take recent developments surrounding the Beijing Olympics. In January, the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) made another request for the U.N. to issue its report on the human-rights violations in Xinjiang before the beginning of the games. Instead, U.N. Secretary General Antonio Guterres announced that he would attend the opening ceremonies of the games and a welcome banquet hosted by Xi Jinping. China has become a powerful force on the U.N. Human Rights Council, and Guterres is keen to maintain a close relationship with its president.

A similar reluctance to confront China exists in the Muslim world. Aside from Turkey, not a single Muslim nation has publicly criticized the Chinese government's treatment of the Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims. Some, like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt, have even defended it. These countries' ties to China are not just economic but also political. Like China, these countries' governments are authoritarian, actively committing human-rights violations of their own. In that sense, a win for China is a win for them, even if it comes at the expense of other Muslims.

Because China is so powerful, the global community's failure to hold it to account for the atrocities committed against the Uyghurs could have serious repercussions. Thus far, China has waved away criticisms with renewed assertions of absolute state sovereignty within its own borders. But that idea was rejected with the creation of the United Nations, when member states, including China, agreed to relinquish some of that sovereignty in favor of international human rights. China must be confronted for its betrayal of that principle. Its ongoing impunity threatens not just the Uyghurs, but also anyone in the world who believes in human rights.

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Altar servers lead the closing procession during a Tridentine Mass at Immaculate Conception Seminary in Huntington, New York, July 1, 2021.

CNS PHOTO/GREGORY A. SHEMITZ

# Has the Pope Been Too Hard on Traditionalists?

*An exchange*

**AUSTEN IVEREIGH**

In December Rome's Congregation for Divine Worship responded to queries from bishops about Pope Francis's new restrictions on the pre–Vatican II liturgy. The fury and contempt that greeted this response were to be expected—more of the same that followed *Traditionis custodes*, the motu proprio in which those restrictions were announced last July. But this time the familiar objections from traditionalists found an echo of sorts among some more liberal-minded Catholics.

The Thomas Merton scholar and Bellarmine University theologian Greg Hillis, for example, wrote in *America* about the apparent contradiction between the pope's call in *Fratelli tutti* for loving dialogue and his "uncharacteristically heavy-handed" treatment of the traditionalists. "At a time when we as a church are embarking on a synodal path," Hillis wrote, "I have difficulty understanding why a more synodal—a more dialogical—approach is not being taken with traditionalists."

This criticism in turn raised objections. As Rita Ferrone has pointed out in *Commonweal*, *Traditionis custodes* was the fruit of a process far more collegial than the ones that produced the liturgical edicts of Francis's predecessors: Francis had consulted with bishops around the world before issuing the new liturgical rules. As for openness to dialogue, there are limits to what it can achieve with those who claim to be in

sole possession of the complete truth. Traditionalist enclaves have become hubs of resistance to the very idea of a living tradition. Benedict XVI had not foreseen this when he relaxed the restrictions on the Tridentine Rite in 2007, but it happened, and now it has fallen to Francis to return the Church to its tradition of a single Roman Rite. The so-called ordinary form of that rite was not simply an alternative to the "extraordinary" form, but a *reform* of it—and a reform undertaken at an ecumenical council under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Still, Hillis was not questioning Francis's *right* to impose new restrictions but asking whether there was not a better way. His point was that, apart from those who were using the liturgy wars to undermine the pope and the Second Vatican Council, there were ordinary adherents to the older rite who had nothing against Vatican II or Pope Francis, and felt, as a result of *Traditionis custodes*, hurt and rejected.

This was the essence of a letter sent in August last year from the superiors-general of the Ecclesia Dei communities to the bishops of France. They did not recognize themselves in the description of traditionalism in *Traditionis custodes*, which claimed that "the instrumental use of the *Missale Romanum* of 1962 is often characterized by a rejection not only of the liturgical reform, but of the Vatican Council II." This "harsh judgment," they said, "creates a feeling of injustice and produces resentment."

The superiors-general went on to cite *Amoris laetitia*, which, given the ferocity of traditionalist rejection of that apostolic exhortation at the time, seemed a bit opportunistic, if not hypocritical. But it was also astute. Where was the merciful face of God in a document that ordered traditionalist Masses not to be advertised in parishes? Where was the attentiveness to the particular? What about the kind of people spotlighted by Stephen G. Adubato in the *National Catholic Reporter*—the non-ideological, neurodivergent traditionalists, the ones with Asperger's, or extreme introversion? Had these innocents not been sledgehammered?

**The sinner remains, however obscurely, open to grace, while the corrupt deny that they sin.**

The question nagged at me over Christmas. What was the key to Francis's discernment in this case? Then I remembered a talk he had given in March 1991, which was later published as an essay with the title "Some Reflections on the Subject of Corruption." And in re-reading it, I understood.

"Corrupción y Pecado" is one of Fr. Jorge Mario Bergoglio's most finely argued and nuanced writings from the time of his so-called "Córdoba exile" in the early 1990s. It was a time of great desolation and suffering for the erstwhile leader of the Argentine Jesuit province, but also one of great fruitfulness, the period in which he produced his best writing. Bergoglio's distinction between sin and corruption is both clear and fascinating. And the conclusion that follows from that distinction—that sin and corruption call for very different responses—explains why Francis chose to act as he did in the face of the traditionalist insurgence.

While corruption is of course connected to sin—resulting from sins repeated and deepened over time—in crucial respects it is different, not least in the corrupt person's distinctive way of proceeding. Hence, writes Bergoglio, "we could say that while sin is forgiven, corruption cannot be forgiven," for at the root of corruption is a refusal of God's forgiveness. The corrupted person or organization sees no need of repentance, and their sense of self-sufficiency gradually comes to be regarded as natural and normal.

Unless corrected the corruption deepens over time, for the corrupt, far from being in reality self-sufficient, are in fact slaves to a "treasure" that has conquered their hearts—e.g., money, power, honor, or privilege. To conceal this enslavement, the corrupt energetically cultivate an appearance of righteousness and good manners. Always justifying themselves, they finally become convinced of their own moral superiority.

Conversely, the sinner—even when not ready to repent—knows that he is a sinner and yearns to throw himself on God's mercy. This is the key distinction: the sinner remains, however obscurely and unconsciously, open to grace, while the corrupt deny that they sin. Enclosed by their pride, they shut out the possibility of grace.

Unlike sin, corruption is not forgiven but "cured." Rather than dialogue, which would only serve to feed the corrupt person's self-justification, the proper response is to put such a person in crisis. As Bergoglio observes in a footnote, the Lord cures the corrupt not through acts of mercy but through major trials: grave illness, bankruptcy, the sudden death of loved ones, the

FBI raiding your office. Such traumas uniquely have the potential to "break down the armor of corruption and allow grace to enter," Bergoglio writes.

Francis has often used armor as a metaphor to describe the heart closed to God. He did so recently at the Mass of the Epiphany, when he said faith was "not a suit of armor that encases us" but rather "a fascinating journey, a constant and restless movement, ever in search of God, always discerning our way forward." To treat faith as a suit of armor—a means of self-defense—is to corrupt it and oneself.

Certain kinds of behavior serve as indicators of corruption. The corrupt typically justify themselves with comparisons to others, like the Pharisee in Luke 18:11. Another warning sign is triumphalism. Whereas the sinner feels not only guilt but shame, the corrupt are triumphantly shameless. They secure accomplices by offering them the same feeling of superiority and self-satisfaction.

It is easy to see why Francis's response to the Italian mafia has been non-dialogical, even "merciless": threatening hell if they do not repent, warning them to renounce their "culture of death," and so on. For violent murderers in organized crime who consider themselves Catholic, to receive a tongue-lashing from the pope might, just possibly, trigger a crisis sufficient to pierce the armor of their corruption. In the same vein, Francis has frequently ordered abusive or corrupt religious communities to be investigated or even closed down.

In his essay, Bergoglio discusses the corruption of Jesus's day, above all in the religious elites of the time: the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and the Zealots. All developed doctrines and rituals—a rigid legalism or a ritualism of purity—that concealed their corruption and allowed them to hold themselves aloof from the people, whom they despised as sinners. The exact nature of the corruption differed in each of the four groups, but always manifested itself in an attitude of remote superiority.

Bergoglio observes, too, that Jesus's response to the corrupt involved recalling the promise of redemption God made to the *whole people*, re-reading the Scriptures in the light of that promise, and performing God's closeness to the poor in his acts and words. As Pope Francis puts it in *Let Us Dream*, "Jesus had to reject the mindset of the religious elites of his day, who had taken ownership of law and tradition. Possession of the goods of religion became a means of putting themselves above others, others not like them, whom they inspected and judged." By walking with the poor and outcast, says Francis, Jesus "smashed the wall that prevented the Lord from coming close to His people, among His flock."

Does Francis see the traditionalist movement as corrupt? He has not used the word, but his actions suggest as much. As someone close to him told me, the pope felt compelled, in *Traditionis custodes*, to "deal with the growth of this discarnate ideology with charity, understanding, and courage to put things in their place." The words "growth" and "put things in their place" are suggestive: this is an effort to lay down boundaries and to forestall an expansion. Archbishop Augustine Di Noia, the American adjunct secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), told *Catholic News Service* that traditionalism "has gotten totally out of control," becoming "a movement that aggressively promotes the Traditional Latin Mass among young people and others as if this 'extraordinary form' were the true liturgy for the true church."

Di Noia was vice president of the Ecclesia Dei commission, which oversees relations with traditionalists, and he has coordinated dialogues with the Society of St. Pius X. The survey of bishops he had carried out at Francis's request showed, he said, that the TLM movement "has hijacked the initiatives of St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI to its own ends." It has promoted division by rejecting the key reform of the Second Vatican Council, the reform of the liturgy. At its "worst," Di Noia said, the movement represents "a perverse resistance to the renewal inspired by the Holy Spirit and solemnly confirmed in the teaching of an ecumenical council."

These comments, together with the letter Pope Francis sent to bishops when *Traditionis custodes* was first promulgated, leave little doubt that he believes he is confronting corruption. Though outwardly pious and religious, the TLM movement is unmistakably a kind of ideology. These traditionalists see themselves as the faithful remnant of a Church in disarray, from which they need to defend themselves. This is the special knowledge revealed to them alone, that justifies holding themselves aloof from mainstream, postconciliar Catholicism, and requiring adherence to special rituals and rules to avoid the contamination of modernity. As one traditionalist wrote in *Catholic World Report*: "Anyone who has had boots on the ground and spent any significant amount of time in traditionalist circles knows [that] denigration of the Novus Ordo Mass and Vatican II is commonplace, and to assert otherwise is dishonest."

Hillis and other irenic critics of *Traditionis custodes* do not seem to have noticed this. They present traditionalists as people with harmless if peculiar liturgical tastes—as if traditionalism were simply a matter of preferring lace and Gregorian chant to the sign of the peace and folk guitars. Peter Seewald displays a similar naïveté in volume two of his *Benedict XVI: A Life*, in which he describes the taste for the old Missal as a cultural trend, a reaction to "adulterated wine and fast food" that has nothing to do with opposition to Vatican II. And while St. John Paul II's biographer George Weigel accepts that "some proponents" of the Old Rite "think themselves the sole faithful remnant of a decaying Church," he rejects the suggestion that "this is the new normal" for traditionalist Mass-goers.

But in that case, why are they—the ones who go purely out of love for this form of liturgy—not rising up against their self-appointed leaders, for whom traditionalism is clearly about much more? Where are the "not-in-my-name"

internal movements, the repudiation of the ideologues, the calls for renewal? At the very least, one might expect calls for a rigorous self-examination. Yet it is striking how rarely one finds "good" traditionalists repudiating the bilious denunciations of Francis and Vatican II that swamp the internet, or the "recognize-and-resist" defiance of the high priests of traditionalism, with their claims of globalist conspiracies.

Bearing in mind Bergoglio's distinction between sin and corruption, the absence of real contrition also speaks volumes. In response to *Traditionis custodes*, some traditionalists have acknowledged the hypothetical possibility of sin, yet never admit to any actual wrongdoing. "We are ready, as every Christian is, to ask forgiveness if some excess of language or mistrust of authority may have crept into any of our members," say the superiors general of Ecclesia Dei. "We are ready to convert if party spirit or pride has polluted our hearts." Why *if* and *may*? Isn't "party spirit and pride" one thing traditionalism has become famous for?

In a similar vein, the UK-based Latin Mass Society says, "God is calling us to atone for our sins," yet one searches their site in vain for any recognition of what those sins might be. In the place of actual contrition, you find indignation, grievance, defiance, and self-justification, an endless outpouring of carefully parsed legal objections, and claims that the pope lacks the prerogative or jurisdiction to restrict the practice of the preconciliar Mass, along with a pained insistence that all anyone wants is to be left alone to say prayers as their forefathers did.

Such reactions reveal the depth of the corruption. This is why Francis has not "dialogued" with the traditionalist movement but instead put bishops back in charge of regulating it. By acting firmly, he has created a crisis that may bring about, in those ready for it, a smell-the-coffee moment. An Opus Dei member tweets about a young, traditionalist priest she knows who had come to see that Francis had done the right thing. The priest had celebrated both the Tridentine and the reformed Roman rite in a hospital, and noticed that certain people who came expecting the old Mass would stand up and leave if he celebrated the reformed rite. He realized that they had constructed their whole identity as Catholics around the TLM, and that they could not recognize Christ's presence in the Eucharist of the reformed liturgy. This identity, the priest had come to see, was not spiritually healthy and needed to be challenged.

**The way traditionalists are described by my fellow progressives, along with their barely restrained glee at Francis's actions, sometimes bothers me more than *Traditionis custodes* itself.**

A synodal approach is the "style of God" with people of good will, however great their sins or disagreements. But dialogue cannot heal corruption. The merciful response to the corrupt is to place a stumbling-block, a *skandalon*, in their path, forcing them to take a different one. One must first offer those who are ready for it an escape from the corruption. Then, if they accept it, one can welcome them back into the fold with open arms.

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## GREGORY HILLIS

In late December, I argued in the pages of *America* that the measures Pope Francis has recently taken against traditionalists—especially the motu proprio *Traditionis custodes*—seem to contravene his pontificate's consistent emphasis on dialogue. "Whereas he has a long history of advocating for dialogue with adversaries, arguing that unity cannot be attained by the suppression of one group by another," I wrote, "Francis appears now to be choosing just that—suppression."

Austen Ivereigh, in response to my article, suggests that I suffer from naïveté when it comes to traditionalists—that I view them merely as "people with harmless if peculiar liturgical tastes." What's more, he argues that I don't comprehend the sheer scale of corruption in the traditionalist movement, corruption that is so pervasive that dialogue should be abandoned: "Rather than dialogue, which would only serve to feed the corrupt person's self-justification, the proper response is to put such a person in crisis."

I made clear in my article that I'm not oblivious to the more dangerous aspects of traditionalism. Not only are too many traditionalists perilously close to rejecting the Second Vatican Council, but, relatedly, there are connections between traditionalism and that which is most vile in the history of the Church: racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and the authoritarianism of today's Catholic integralists, for example. The threat this style of traditionalism poses to ecclesial unity is real.

Still, I remained troubled by the discontinuity between Francis's emphasis on dialogue and his actions vis-a-vis traditionalists, and if Ivereigh is correct that Francis views traditionalists as so corrupt as to deserve suppression, then I am even more troubled.

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

I cannot pretend to have studied Francis's pre-papal life and writings as much as Ivereigh has, of course. But having read Massimo Borghesi's depiction of Jorge Bergoglio's theology and ecclesiology in *The Mind of Pope Francis* (for which Ivereigh wrote an endorsement), I can't help but note the disjunction between the dialectical focus of Bergoglio's thought both before and after he became pope and what is found in *Traditionis custodes*. In his book, Borghesi persuasively argues that, influenced by his reading of St. Ignatius of Loyola and theologians like Romano Guardini, Bergoglio understood that ecclesial unity could not be imposed from above—that there necessarily exists a polarity in the Church that can and should flower into a communion that doesn't abolish tension but lives into it. "The Ignatian vision is the possibility of harmonizing opposites," Bergoglio wrote in 1976, "of inviting to a common table concepts that seem irreconcilable, because it brings them to a higher plane where they can find their synthesis." He continued: "Unity through reduction is relatively easy but not lasting. More difficult is to forge a unity that does not annul differences or reduce conflict."

How does this conception of unity lived out in creative tension square with the path of *Traditionis custodes*, the non-dialogical nature of which Ivereigh himself acknowledges? And how does this understanding of unity in any way square with Ivereigh's depiction of a pope who suppresses traditionalists as an act of mercy in order to force them into conformity? These incongruities are underscored by *Traditionis custodes* being handed down just before the start of a synodal process that explicitly insists on the importance of open dialogue.

To his credit, Ivereigh doesn't try to soft-pedal *Traditionis custodes*; instead, he defends the very features of it to which I object. To do so, however, he portrays traditionalists in a way that lacks nuance. Indeed, the ways in which traditionalists are described by my fellow progressives, combined with their barely restrained glee at Francis's actions, sometimes bothers me more than *Traditionis custodes* itself. Ivereigh argues that all traditionalists—from traditionalist bishops down to the young traditionalist who finds herself spiritually nourished by the Extraordinary Form—are so corrupted by ideology as to not merit a dialogical response. Ivereigh even compares traditionalists to the Italian mafia whose sins are such that they can only be shocked into repentance.

If "good" traditionalists exist, Ivereigh asks, why don't they stand up against the hateful comments made against Francis by hordes of pseudonymous online trolls? Given that our political and ecclesial divisions are too often exacerbated by social media, I have to admit that I'm not inclined to criticize anyone for not posting enough on Twitter or arguing in the comments section of Facebook. And surely I am not the only progressive Catholic who has met many "good" traditionalists online and in person and engaged in constructive and even vibrant dialogue with them. I've met traditionalists of all ages; some have been my students. They have always recognized me as fully Catholic even while acknowledging the very real differences that exist between various aspects of our theology, ecclesiology, and morality. The unity we experience is one forged by precisely the kind of dialogue Francis has urged.

In a passage about the influence of Guardini on Bergoglio's thought, Borghesi writes that "*communio* is realized in a *dialogical* form, in the patient development of interconnections that does not pretend to negate the accents, the variety of approaches that remain." Too many of my fellow progressives appear more willing to demonize opponents than engage with them. They refuse to acknowledge anything good in the other, and, whether consciously or not, thereby give themselves an excuse to avoid the hard work and even discomfort of dialogue rooted in love that fosters communion across differences.

These differences are not new in the Church. As the response to *Traditionis custodes* has unfolded, I've thought a lot about Thomas Merton's 1965 book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, in which he wrote about the hardening divisions between "conservatives" and "progressives" in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.

Merton's description of "extreme conservatives" in the 1960s certainly bears marked similarities to some of our contemporary traditionalists, particularly the legion of Twitterati who attack Francis behind the safety of a Latin pseudonym. According to Merton, some conservatives will seemingly "go to any length in order to defend their own fanatical concept of the Church." Not only is their understanding of tradition "static and inert"; it actually celebrates some of the most questionable and scandalous facets of Church history: "Inquisition, persecution, intolerance, Papal power, clerical influence, alliance with worldly power, love of wealth and pomp, etc." They're characterized by triumphalism and a belief that *they* are the Church.

But Merton is no less scathing in his criticism of "extreme progressives." While progressives shout about the necessity of dialogue and openness, some are "hermetically closed" to conservative Catholics. These progressives are guilty of their own "arrogant triumphalism" that ridicules and dismisses conservative voices, thereby showing "a serious lack of that love to which they frequently appeal in justification of their procedures."

I don't pretend to have any special insight into why Francis chose to deal with traditionalists in the way he has. I trust him and am open to the possibility that I am missing something. Still, I can't shake the conviction that Merton's admonition applies just as much now as it did when he wrote it.

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# The Reform Was Real

**Shaun Blanchard**

*Despite their differences, Francis and Benedict agree that fidelity to the Gospel has required the Church to change—and not merely reformulate—some of its teachings.*

The publication of Pope Francis's motu proprio *Traditionis custodes* last summer marked a decisive moment in the history of the reception of the Second Vatican Council. The pope's concern for the legacy of Vatican II is apparent in the document itself, and even more so in the accompanying cover letter. In essentially revoking Pope Benedict XVI's *Summorum pontificum*, which gave sweeping permission to celebrate the preconciliar Latin Mass, Francis regretted that his predecessor's good will had been abused. The "instrumental use" of the preconciliar Mass, according to Francis, "is often characterized by a rejection not only of the liturgical reform, but of the Vatican Council II itself." The recent motu proprio is in many ways the juridical codification of a position that Pope Francis had already given voice to a number of times. He did so most bluntly in a 2017 speech, describing the liturgical reforms of Vatican II as "irreversible" judgments of "the magisterium" of the Church.

Retired Pope Benedict XVI greets Pope Francis at the Mater Ecclesiae monastery at the Vatican, 2013.

CNS PHOTO/L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO VIA REUTERS

Francis's recent decisions have greatly intensified accusations that he has repudiated the so-called "hermeneutic of continuity" often attributed to Pope Benedict. In truth, Francis and Benedict are in basic agreement regarding the nature of continuity and change at Vatican II. Despite popular belief, Benedict did not advocate for a stagnant hermeneutic of continuity that seeks to explain away all discontinuity. Rather, he taught that Vatican II should be understood through a "hermeneutic of reform" that includes both continuity and discontinuity, albeit "on different levels." In his own understanding of the relationship between continuity and change, the Argentinian Jesuit is following the path his Bavarian predecessor described, most clearly, in a 2005 address to the Roman Curia. His words on that occasion will be of interest not only to theologians, but to all Catholics intellectually engaged in their faith.

In issuing *Summorum pontificum* in 2007, Benedict hoped that the celebration of what he named the "extraordinary," or preconciliar, form of the Roman Rite of the Mass would complement the celebration of the "ordinary" postconciliar form. *Traditionis custodes* makes clear that Francis believes his predecessor's project has been a failure. It opens with the striking declaration that the conciliar Mass is the "unique expression of the *lex orandi* of the Roman Rite." Francis seems to doubt that it is still possible to break the link between preconciliar liturgy and anti-conciliar theology. At any rate, he has judged that it is no longer prudent to keep trying to do so.

It is clear that Francis disagrees with Benedict about some important liturgical questions and the best means of reconciling traditionalists with Rome. But has he departed from Benedict's *theological* understanding of continuity, discontinuity, and Vatican II? Many of Francis's critics seem to

think so. Fr. Peter Stravinskas, writing in the *Catholic World Report* this past August, accused Francis of departing from the "hermeneutic of continuity" authoritatively taught by popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI for over thirty years. According to Stravinskas, Francis "has given clear signals for eight years that he holds to the hermeneutic of rupture." The pope himself thus "calls into question the indefectibility of the Church." EWTN's Raymond Arroyo told his millions of viewers that *Traditionis custodes* revealed a "preferential option for innovation." To Arroyo, Pope Francis "seems to be saying everything before Vatican II is null and void." For Arroyo, the foil for Francis's instability and radicalism was, of course, the always dependable Pope Benedict.

On Gloria Purvis's America Media podcast, the Benedictine liturgist Anthony Ruff commented that some "Catholics were misled about the traditional Latin Mass." It's a claim that would, and did, infuriate many traditionalists. Ruff's comment reminded me of the many bitter, shocked, and sometimes sarcastic reactions to the motu proprio that I've seen on the internet, reactions expressing not only disappointment but also a sense of betrayal. One could expand on Ruff's observation, for if some Catholics were misled about the traditional Latin Mass, many of them were also misled about the "hermeneutic of continuity." The confusion and tumult now afflicting parts of the Catholic Church, especially in the United States, is not only liturgical but also theological and ecclesiological.

Of course, there are many practicing Catholics who are uninterested in these debates. Yet the tide of perplexity and anger rising against the current pontificate is undeniable, and it is rising farthest and fastest among highly engaged American Catholics, many of whom hold ministerial and educational roles. Such Catholics claim to feel a sense of disorientation; they are bracing themselves for what this totally new kind of pope could do next. Such sentiments are expressed not only by peddlers of outrage on YouTube and Twitter, but also by some voices with broader appeal among ordinary Catholics. They thought they knew where they stood, on the firm ground of "continuity," and now that ground seems to be giving way beneath them.

The pope's most ardent supporters and most vehement critics would agree on one thing at least: Francis believes that, under certain circumstances, doctrine can change. His words and actions concerning everything from Vatican II to *Amoris laetitia* suggest such a position. But the clearest evidence is to be found in his teaching on the death penalty, now reflected in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Does such a perspective not contradict Pope Benedict, the guardian of orthodoxy who censured those who maintained there could be "discontinuity" in Catholic doctrine?

Catholics pushing a static understanding of Benedict's "hermeneutic of continuity" should reconsider the extent to which their understanding of doctrinal development is rooted in the thought of the man who wrote these words:

> If it is desirable to offer a diagnosis of [Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes*] as a whole, we might say that (in conjunction with the texts on religious liberty and world religions) it is a revision of the Syllabus of Pius IX, a kind of countersyllabus.... Let us be content to say that the text serves as a countersyllabus and, as such, represents, on the part of the Church, an attempt at an official reconciliation with the new era inaugurated in 1789. (*Principles of Catholic Theology*, 1987; originally published in German in 1975)

If this statement was presented without attribution to theologically informed Catholics, and they were asked to guess the author, then I suspect that Hans Küng or Walter Kasper would receive far more votes than Joseph Ratzinger. At any rate, Ratzinger's statement would certainly be censured by many traditionalists as self-evidently heretical. Orthodox Catholics, surely, should speak of Pius IX's teaching being "organically developed"; talk of "revision" and the production of conciliar texts "counter" to previous magisterial documents smacks of liberal Catholicism or, even worse, modernism.

And yet the historical record is clear: whatever changes that Ratzinger's thinking underwent during his long career, he always understood Vatican II reform as involving both continuity and discontinuity. It is easy to see how someone might miss this fact. Ratzinger was certainly well known for his deep frustration with the "hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture," a phrase he coined. He sometimes sounded bitter about the state of the postconciliar Church, as in the widely publicized *Ratzinger Report* (1985). The progressivist paradigm for interpreting and implementing Vatican II was definitely a—if not *the*—main target for Ratzinger during his long tenure as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith from 1981 to 2005.

By the 1980s, Ratzinger was known to hold that there were basically three positions on Vatican II. Two of them were erroneous and theologically dangerous, even potentially schismatic; only one was orthodox. First, Ratzinger impugned a traditionalist hermeneutic that he associated primarily with Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, the founder of the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX). Second was a far more popular progressive hermeneutic that saw Vatican II not as reform but as revolution, a totally new beginning. (Some vapid postconciliar *Gather* hymns I suffered through as a young man sum up this paradigm—e.g. "sing a new Church into being"). Both of these two paradigms were hermeneutics of discontinuity, unorthodox because they posited a break or rupture in the Church's continuous, Spirit-led journey through history.

Thus, Ratzinger was understood to believe that Vatican II, if read correctly, did not and could not change doctrine; it could only update pastoral strategies or amend Church discipline. Figures such as *First Things* editor Richard John Neuhaus, neither a traditionalist nor an enemy of the council, fell into this unhelpful continuity-discontinuity binary. He slammed the Jesuit historian John O'Malley's *What Happened at Vatican II*, a moderate and judicious overview of the council that takes seriously both its deep continuities with previous councils and its striking innovations. Neuhaus condemned O'Malley's work as belonging to the "the Lefebvrists of the left": just like SSPX,

**Not only did doctrine develop at Vatican II, but the development of doctrine was explicitly named and recognized as a fruitful reality of the Church's life.**

these progressives believed the council brought "a radical break from tradition" and "in effect, a different Catholicism."

Neuhaus's reaction to O'Malley's book represented a perspective common among conservative U.S. Catholics, and predominant in many seminaries and campus ministries. Media organizations like EWTN and a host of new apologists and popular speakers often promote this kind of narrative. Surely one of the main reasons that Pope Francis shocked so many American Catholics was that they had been formed by this catechesis of rigid continuity. I was well schooled in this kind of catechesis as a high-school and college student: *we Catholics stay the same; the Protestants change*. That was the party line. And the secular world changed even more, because it was in thrall to the "dictatorship of relativism." I recall a meme that summed up this simplistic worldview: a skeleton, sitting on a park bench, above which appeared the words "still waiting for the Catholic Church to change." This was intended as a boast, not a criticism. When I first explored Vatican II as an undergraduate, I began wondering if I had been misled. Why, if Cardinal Ottaviani's motto was *semper idem* ("always the same"), did he lose so many arguments?

Soon after his election as Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger gave his landmark speech on the nature of continuity and change in the Church. It was his Christmas 2005 address to the Roman Curia. He began by observing that conflicting hermeneutical models are the reason it has been so difficult to implement the council "in large parts of the Church." He then rehearsed his well-known arguments against the "hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture." The alternative, however, he did not call "the hermeneutic of continuity," but rather the hermeneutic of *reform*. Indeed, the pope explicitly clarified that reform sometimes includes "discontinuity" alongside continuity, though the two are "on different levels." Benedict grounded his hermeneutic of reform in the positions of John XXIII and Paul VI, citing Pope John's famous inaugural speech opening the council in October 1962 and Pope Paul's concluding address in December 1965. Benedict was thereby claiming continuity with the now-sainted conciliar popes—a subtle but clear reassertion of papal interpretive sovereignty against both progressives and traditionalists.

Benedict begins his 2005 address by discussing theological anthropology and the Church in the modern world, themes that the council tackled most explicitly in *Gaudium et spes*. This is one of the documents, along with *Nostra aetate* (on world religions) and *Dignitatis humanae* (on religious liberty), that he considered a "countersyllabus" to Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors*. It is no coincidence that those now attacking Vatican II—including, sadly, some prelates in full communion with the Church—focus upon these texts.

Benedict provides context for his "hermeneutic of reform" by identifying a number of questions that emerged in the past several centuries. These questions—scientific, historical, philosophical, and political—demanded responses from the Church that were both practical and theological. "It is clear," Benedict said, "that in all these sectors, which all together form a single problem, some kind of discontinuity might emerge." Such discontinuity is a real change, but it is always connected to a deeper continuity of Catholic principles that can never be abandoned. Indeed, "it is precisely in this combination" of continuity and discontinuity that Benedict located "the very nature of true reform." The pope thus recognized the "contingent" nature of some Church teachings, even some that had been held for centuries. What he calls an "innovation in continuity" can and sometimes must occur, provided certain "principles…remain as an undercurrent, motivating decisions from within."

How, then, should one distinguish "true reform" from false? And what do Pope Benedict and Pope Francis mean when they say that the Vatican II "reformed" the Church? Theologians and historians often identify Vatican II reform as consisting of three elements: *aggiornamento*, *ressourcement*, and the development of doctrine. Benedict's defense of doctrinal change regarding religious liberty and Francis's justification for doctrinal change on the death penalty in 2017 both appeal to this set of elements.

Let's briefly consider each of them. *Aggiornamento* is an Italian word that can be translated as "updating." For Catholics, especially of a certain generation, it immediately brings to mind John XXIII and his calls for letting "fresh air" into the Church. The *aggiornamento* of Vatican II included some disciplinary and administrative changes, but everyone agrees that it also included some deeper changes, whether these are to be celebrated or lamented. In Ratzinger's provocative phrase, the council attempted "an official reconciliation with the new era inaugurated in 1789"—a reference to the French Revolution.

*Ressourcement*, a French neologism associated with *nouvelle théologie* thinkers like the Dominican Yves Congar and the Jesuit Henri de Lubac, means a return to the sources, in this case Scripture, the Church Fathers, and the liturgy of the early Church. As an element of reform, *ressourcement* means searching historical texts in order to apply the theological wisdom of the past to the present.

Finally, not only did doctrine develop at Vatican II (as at many other ecumenical councils), but the development of doctrine was explicitly named and recognized as a fruitful reality of the Church's life (*Dei verbum,* article 8), and the council fathers explicitly claimed to be developing doctrine

in *Dignitatis humanae* (article 1). It was novel to embed such a claim in a doctrinal document itself.

Taken together, *aggiornamento*, *ressourcement*, and the development of doctrine can shed light on different aspects of the same reform. Pope Benedict demonstrated this in his discussion of religious liberty in the 2005 Christmas address, though he did not use this terminology explicitly. In Vatican II reform, one or more of these phenomena is present, and sometimes all three. Only a hermeneutic of reform that acknowledges "continuity and discontinuity on different levels," in full awareness of the complexities and challenges of history and the Church's own doctrinal legacy, can make sense of such changes in a way that is both theologically responsible and intellectually coherent.

A hermeneutic of reform also serves the Church by helping Catholics narrate and understand our own history. On the one hand, it helps us avoid an intellectually narrow triumphalism that uses the past only as an apologetic tool, thus avoiding the real moral and theological challenges raised by history. On the other, the hermeneutic of reform is a properly theological paradigm and not a reduction of theology to politics or an abandonment of trust in God's providence. This approach is evident in Benedict's treatment of Catholicism's struggle with modern political, social, and scientific developments—and, in particular, in his defense of Vatican II's landmark teaching on religious liberty.

After long and protracted debate—maybe the most heated of the council—*Dignitatis humanae* proclaimed that "the human person has a right to religious freedom" and immunity "from coercion" by any human authority (article 2). Today, this seems like an obvious statement that no sensible person could ever have denied, least of all a Christian. But Vatican II's full-throated approval of religious liberty was one of the most stunning doctrinal changes in Catholic history. The council could have justified its teaching by appealing to prudence and the obvious reality of new political circumstances; contemporary Catholic "integralists" who yearn for the Church to return to the politics and theology of coercion wish that the council had limited itself to contingencies. But *Dignitatis humanae* justified doctrinal development by appealing to properly theological concerns: "The right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself."

The Vatican II fathers did not attempt a sleight-of-hand and claim that *Dignitatis humanae* was just reconfirming what the Church had always taught. (No one would have believed them had they tried.) Rather, the council fathers acknowledged that they were innovating. But they did so while seeking out a deeper continuity with the tradition of the Church and the message of Jesus, one that relied on fundamental Christian principles. They also left room for future Catholics to further explain and justify this momentous change.

Joseph Ratzinger had to face this challenge squarely as John Paul II's right-hand man in negotiations with traditionalists after the council. While best known for their refusal to accept the new Mass, SSPX actually found *Dignitatis humanae* to be the most obviously unacceptable product of the council. While much of what disturbed them in, say, *Lumen gentium* could potentially be categorized as further development of accepted doctrinal concepts or as *ressourcement*, *Dignitatis humanae* clearly involved, in the theologian Thomas Guarino's words, the "reversal" of past teaching.

Ratzinger had thought deeply about these problems for decades. He never thought of trying to fit square pegs into round holes. That is, he knew that one could not demonstrate continuity in all matters, and that it was futile and dishonest to try. Just as modern historical criticism could not be met by the denials or tortured textual contortions of biblical fundamentalism, neither could the problem of history and the demands of reform be met by an equally dubious magisterial fundamentalism. Real doctrinal change had occurred at Vatican II—and needed to occur—and this change required a theologically rigorous and historically conscious explanation.

At the council, the religious-liberty issue was tightly linked both to ecclesiology and ecumenism. As some wryly pointed out at the time, it is hard to ask Protestants to dialogue as brothers and sisters in Christ while also maintaining that the ideal church-state arrangement would relegate them to second-class citizenship or even coerce them. In his 2005 speech, Pope Benedict correctly connected *Dignitatis humanae* to "a single problem, the problem of modernity." Benedict recognized that the Church's "bitter and radical condemnation of this spirit of the modern age" was understandable in light of the violence of the French Revolution and anticlerical regimes that marginalized or even persecuted Catholics. As a result, the path to "positive and fruitful understanding" between the Church and modern societies had been tragically impeded, and there was more than enough blame to go around.

Nevertheless, after low points like the *Syllabus*, there was a growth in mutual understanding. Politically, a realization grew that not all lay states need be oppressive; the American Revolution was very different from France's, and the American tradition of religious freedom very different from France's *laïcité*. The interwar period in twentieth-century Europe was marked by a number of political enterprises that reimagined the lay state, drawing on rich Catholic and Christian heritages. Indeed, Catholic social doctrine in particular "became an important model between radical liberalism and the Marxist theory of the State." What Pope Benedict described was the long process of *aggiornamento*, though he didn't use the term. The Church, true to its own tradition and principles, was meeting the concrete demands of the world in which it found itself. This is not so different, Benedict noted, from "the events of previous epochs." One is reminded of his esteem for St. John Henry Newman, who acknowledged not only the reality of growth and change within the Church, but the necessity of it. It is, after all, *living* things that change, not dead things.

**Certain reforms pursued at Vatican II—especially those having to do with ecumenism, religious liberty, and a new perspective on the Jewish people—demanded a reckoning with the dark parts of Church history.**

Anticipating objections, Benedict agreed that some kinds of change are not defensible. If, for example, religious liberty had been justified in terms of a "human inability to discover the truth," it would be a corruption and a false reform. Agreeing with Catholic critics of religious liberty, Benedict insisted that humans are "capable of knowing the truth about God" and are thus "bound to this knowledge" by their consciences. He then made a striking statement. In "making its own an essential principle of the modern State" the council "has recovered the deepest patrimony of the Church." It would be difficult to find a stronger claim to *ressourcement*, or a more compelling justification for a development of doctrine: "By so doing she [the contemporary Church] can be conscious of being in full harmony with the teaching of Jesus himself (cf. Matthew 22:21), as well as with the Church of the martyrs of all time."

Thus, Pope Benedict's defense of doctrinal change at Vatican II was rooted not only in important socio-political conditions that demanded *aggiornamento*, but in a richly theological *ressourcement* that claimed a deeper continuity with the earliest sources of the faith—and above all, with the teaching and example of Jesus:

> The martyrs of the early Church died for their faith in that God who was revealed in Jesus Christ, and for this very reason they also died for freedom of conscience and the freedom to profess one's own faith—a profession that no State can impose but which, instead, can only be claimed with God's grace in freedom of conscience.

Traditionalists opposed to Vatican II are right to focus on *Dignitatis humanae*. This document, more than any other, is manifestly at odds with previous teachings. The reason the Declaration on Religious Liberty is so often attacked—or subjected to tortured revisionist readings—is that it is not just about prudential social and political questions. It has deep ecumenical, interreligious, and ecclesiological implications, which were highlighted in Pope Benedict's 2005 address. *Dignitatis humanae* marked an abandonment of ecclesial triumphalism, and an embrace, at the level of principle, of nonviolent witness and evangelical love over coercion and domination.

Benedict's hermeneutic of reform is undergirded by an honest and rigorous theology of history. His appreciation of the contingencies of history, together with a humbler and more biblical ecclesiology, allowed Benedict to conclude that Vatican II had given us "a new definition of the relationship between the faith of the Church and certain essential elements of modern thought." In doing so, the council "reviewed" and "even corrected certain historical decisions, but in this apparent discontinuity it has actually preserved and deepened her inmost nature and true identity." In short, the Church had to change in order to stay the same. It had to change in order to be faithful to the Gospel.

Benedict's language of "reviewing" or even "correcting" certain past decisions brings to mind the thought of his friend, Yves Congar. Congar argued that "*autocritique*" formed an essential element of reform. Before he became Pope John XXIII, Cardinal Roncalli reportedly scribbled "A reform of the Church? Is such a thing possible" on his copy of Congar's *True and False Reform in the Church* (1950). While Vatican II opened the door to ecclesial self-critique in a new way, reckoning with ecclesial sins and errors is still a challenge for the Church as it reels from the abuse crisis and suffers from deep polarization and dysfunction.

Certain reforms pursued at Vatican II—especially those having to do with ecumenism, religious liberty, and a new perspective on the Jewish people—demanded a reckoning with the dark parts of Church history. This reckoning could not limit itself to recognizing the sins of individual Catholics. Honesty about the historical record demanded addressing not only attitudes and policies but also doctrines. And revisiting this history could bring to light a need for repentance. The Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*, gets closer than any other Vatican II document to articulating this difficult dynamic in article 6:

> Christ summons the Church to continual reformation (*perennem reformationem*) as she sojourns here on earth. The Church is always in need of this, in so far as she is an institution of men here on earth. Thus if, in various times and circumstances, there have been deficiencies in moral conduct or in church discipline, or even in the way that church teaching has been formulated—to be carefully distinguished from the deposit of faith itself—these can and should be set right at the opportune moment.

This is the only time Vatican II applies the fraught term *reformatio* to the Church. It is deeply significant that this term, a loaded one since the sixteenth century, was applied to the formulation of doctrine. Although *Unitatis redintegratio* makes it clear that reform cannot alter an unchangeable "deposit of faith," the council called here for something more than just the overhauling of discipline. This is thoroughly Congarian. His *True and False Reform* argued that the Church had to go beyond merely addressing abuses or misunderstandings, though without touching dogma. Of course, this is easier said than done, as the tense and at times explosive debates at and after the Council have shown.

A recent example of this tension is the reaction to Pope Francis's change to Church teaching on the death penal-

ty. Those disturbed by this change do not necessarily want their own governments to execute criminals. Many of these critics accepted (sometimes grudgingly) John Paul II's de facto rejection of the death penalty as a punishment virtually never necessary in modern societies. The reason that Francis's amendment to the Catechism in August 2018 caused such controversy in some circles was that it seemed to entail a de jure repudiation of the death penalty. (Some, feverishly parsing the word "inadmissible," disputed this interpretation.) This response is similar to the traditionalist acceptance of a de facto toleration of non-Catholics, but not a de jure endorsement of religious liberty. They oppose *Dignitatis humanae*—or try to empty it of meaning—precisely because it raised religious liberty to the level of theological principle. Pope Francis's justifications for his teaching on the death penalty are more or less the same in this regard. He has appealed to the same kind of understanding of human dignity as well as to *ressourcement* principles, citing the example of Jesus and the early Church. And his critics have appealed to the same arguments used by opponents of contemporary Church teaching on religious liberty—long lists of theological authorities and magisterial texts that do indeed prove a discontinuity between what the Church teaches now and what it used to teach.

I believe that one reason this kind of discontinuity of doctrine is either rejected or denied is that it raises the issue of ecclesial sin and repentance. Many Catholics remain wedded to the idea that, while individual Catholics may sin, the Church itself remains faultless. But any plain reading of the actions and words of the postconciliar popes suggests that ecclesial repentance is sometimes necessary. John Paul II's "Day of Pardon" and his famous apologies for the Inquisition, colonialism, the Galileo case, and even the burning of the proto-Protestant Bohemian preacher Jan Hus are either incomprehensible or repugnant to those who insist on a triumphalist reading of Church history.

Of course, such apologies can be—and have been—interpreted as apologies for individual abuses. For example, no one would deny that *some* inquisitors sinned in *some* circumstances (perhaps because they were motivated by money or a grudge rather than an appropriate zeal against heresy). An apology for the Inquisition is thus transformed into an apology for certain corrupt Inquisitors. While such contortions might seem rather pathetic in light of contemporary Catholic teaching and John Paul II's obvious intent, they do in fact highlight a deeply serious theological problem that postconciliar Catholicism has not fully resolved. When, and in what way, can the Church apologize for something it consistently taught for centuries—for example, that it was okay to punish recalcitrant heretics with imprisonment or even death? Some contemporary "integralists" clearly believe that the Church should not apologize for past teachings or practices, but only for particular excesses attributable to individuals. This is, I think, the main reason for the tortured re-readings of *Dignitatis humanae*, and for much of the opposition to Pope Francis's teaching on the death penalty.

Pope Francis has never treated these issues systematically, but he has made his own views plain. In a fascinating morning meditation given in April 2014, he spoke of those persecuted "from outside" the Church but also "from within." Without naming him, Francis focused on Antonio Rosmini (1797–1855), calling him "a true prophet, who in his books reproached the Church for falling away from the path of the Lord." How, Francis asked, could someone "be a heretic yesterday and a blessed today?" He answered his own question with typical Bergoglian bluntness: "Today, the Church…thanks be to God, knows how to repent." (The complicated story of Rosmini, who was never excommunicated, was addressed by Ratzinger in a somewhat convoluted 2001 CDF decree.)

In an October 2017 address, a year before the Catechism's teaching on the death penalty was changed, Francis showed how his ideas about ecclesial sin and repentance inform his own view of doctrinal development. When it comes to the death penalty, a "mere résumé of traditional teaching" isn't enough. An adequate perspective must take "into account not only the doctrine as it has developed in the teaching of recent popes, but also the change in the awareness of the Christian people" concerning human dignity. He then made a striking theological claim: the death penalty "is *per se* contrary to the Gospel." What does this say about the centuries of official Catholic support for the death penalty? Francis offered a familiar historical sketch of how this doctrine had developed over time. Then he expressed his own regret that the death penalty had even been carried out in the Papal States, calling it an "extreme and inhumane remedy that ignored the primacy of mercy over justice." Catholics, according to Francis, should "take responsibility for the past and recognize that the imposition of the death penalty was dictated by a mentality more legalistic than Christian."

In support of his condemnation of the death penalty, Francis cited *Dei verbum* 8, which depends on the work of Cardinal Newman and St. Vincent of Lérins. Francis's understanding of the development of doctrine makes plenty of room for departures and reversals. He writes that "the harmonious development of doctrine demands that we cease to defend arguments that now appear clearly contrary to the new understanding of Christian truth." True, he doesn't seem to like words such as "change" and "contradict"—he even argues, rather unconvincingly, that his revision of the Catechism's teaching on the death penalty "in no way represents a change in doctrine." Benedict was more frank in his recognition of the change regarding religious liberty, but he too insisted on a deeper continuity of principles.

Change and discontinuity are certainly manifest in both these cases. But if Benedict's hermeneutic of reform is correct, that is as it should be. Contrary to those who fear that the magisterium is undermined by any hint of discontinuity, the ability to change, self-correct, and sometimes even repent increases the credibility of the Church.

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## THE HERMIT RETURNS

*Richard Schiffman*

Days before the lame-duck hermit left, the trees
withdrew into their caverned carapace of bark.
The clouds gazed down aloofly, shrugged,
the moon shucked off its cryptic gleams,
the rains were only rains again, not drops of manna.

When a play's run ends, the stage hands
cart away the painted fronts, the rented furniture.
The actors strip off their makeup,
trade their costumes for a sweatshirt and jeans,
exit the stage door, hail a cab home.

So too the hermit returned in the end
to the sooty city. But when he rubbed
the soot from his eyes,
a veil of self-pity had wondrously lifted,
and the skyline gleamed like a cryptic moon.

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# Tears & Ashes

**Vincent Miller**

*Three ways of looking at the recent wildfires in the West*

From December 2020 to January 2022, Douglas fir seedlings grow in the Blue River Conservation Easement, Oregon, after the Holiday Farm Fire.

As life in the Anthropocene unfolds ever more rapidly, what were once called "biblical" disasters—fires, floods, locusts, and whirlwinds—have become a daily reality. We watch anxiously as catastrophes occur, at least as much as our screens allow, but still go about our business: reading the next story in our newsfeed or wading into half-flooded subways to avoid being late for work. The problem we face is more difficult than mere inattentiveness: we need to cultivate a way of seeing adequate to the changed world being revealed in these catastrophes.

What we watch on a screen unfolds in a place. Take the Holiday Farm Fire, one of the 2020 Labor Day fires in Oregon. Hot dry winds from the east blew hard over forests dried to tinder by a summer of record low rains. Hurricane force winds sparked electrical lines and whipped small smoldering fires into infernos. The fires roared over ridges and down the McKenzie River valley faster than alerts could be issued, shocking even those long accustomed to living with red-flag fire warnings. Emergency alerts skipped immediately from Level 1 ("Be ready") to Level 3 ("Go!"). Many barely escaped with their lives. Some did not.

The Labor Day fires burned more than a tenth of the Oregon Cascades, incinerated entire towns, destroyed thousands of homes, killed eleven people and untold animals. Outside the fire zone, the rest of us watched the now-familiar genre of shaky phone videos of escape drives through infernos and listened to coronavirus-masked reporters interviewing traumatized survivors. Thousands of miles away, we marveled, conflicted or ignorant, at the beauty of sunsets rendered magnificent by the remains of Western forests scattered in the stratosphere.

Surveying the ashes, we can ask: What were these wildfires? Were they the latest turn of an ancient cycle of fire and regeneration in which these forests have evolved to thrive? Or did the blood-red skies over cities from San Francisco to Seattle portend something new, something as dystopian as the films they so eerily evoked? The uncertainty here is deeper than the statistics of climate science. It cuts to the heart of our ability to see and respond to the moment in which we are living. Even those deeply attuned to the unfolding climate crises face the question: How to attend to the full truth of these fires?

Our typical ways of seeing, formed by the ephemerality and superficiality of the media flow, do not prepare us for this. But we can hone our gaze by considering alternatives to

All photos by David Paul Bayles. These images are part of a long-term collaboration with scientist Frederick J. Swanson to document post-fire recovery and resilience.

**It requires serious work of imagination to think in forest time. Human lives are not easily attuned to these timescales.**

the shallow seeing of everyday life: the deep time of forest cycles and the ancient biblical tradition of the apocalyptic. Doing so might offer an unexpected way to see through the smoke—and better meet the demands of this new and disorienting moment.

**I. Forest Time**

Even after such a fierce wildfire, most trees remain standing, their bark blackened and peeling, branches twisted and stripped of life. Sap pours down many trunks—a last-ditch effort to heal wounds beyond repair. Beneath the charred remains of trees, everything is reduced to the inorganic end of the palette: the charcoal black of burnt stumps and fallen branches, the ocher of clay soils, some sintered into ceramic by the kiln-hot blast of the wildfire. The colors of life—the greens of leaves and browns of humus centuries deep—are burnt away to shades of gray. What remains of the soil sinks underneath each step, as newly created voids collapse—microscopic crematoria that once pulsed with the underground forest life of roots, fungi, and countless invertebrates. Terrain that used to be dense with hummocks of vegetation, decaying logs, and ancient stumps is emptied. Trenches stretch where fallen logs lay. Tunnels twist into the ground where massive roots anchored trees.

The burned landscape exceeds easy comprehension. Loss is truly absence. The once-green horizon is stripped; naked rock ridges show through the standing dead remains of the forest. The once hushed press of understory is opened to the sounds of wind. Sight itself takes place in the altered light beneath the twisted remains of the incinerated canopy. What is most literally no longer present might be the most significant: the missing biomass of trees, plants, and soil that has become countless megatons of atmospheric carbon dioxide.

Within months, green returns to the seeming wasteland. Shoots spout from charred trunks and blackened sword fern crowns. By spring, fire moss—its spores always waiting unseen on the wind—blankets the ground to a startling depth. Understory plants such as Oregon grape and fireweed follow by summer. And, miraculous to see, tiny Douglas fir seedlings sprout, often in the collapsing tunnels that held the roots of the previous generation.

From the perspective of forest time, wildfires are nothing new. Fire plays an essential role in the west-slope Cascades by opening the canopy so that shade-intolerant species can find the sun they need to grow. If you've stood in an old-growth stand of Douglas fir, chances are good that it dates from a previous catastrophic fire. Indeed, the groves that form our collective imagination of ancient forests were mostly born in the aftermath of a period of intense fire activity five hundred years ago. No fire, no Douglas fir forests.

Like a wave surging back and forth across the landscape for millennia, the forest has, time and again, regrown after the devastation of fire and windthrow. Taking a still longer perspective, back into evolutionary and deep geological time, the forest itself, ever adapting, surfs the roiling volcanic ranges thrown up by the subduction fault at the foot of the continent's edge.

There is, perhaps, a kind of hope to be found in these cycles. Devastation and ashes are part of a larger cycle of regrowth and flourishing. This is akin to the Wisdom traditions in the Hebrew Scriptures that sought to learn from the cycles of nature: "For everything, there is a season."

It requires serious work of imagination, however, to think in forest time. Recolonization by Douglas firs takes three decades, the full development of the forest community a century, maturity twice that, and "old growth" longer still. In its more critical moments, the Wisdom tradition stresses the evanescence of human life. We are but *hebel*—often translated as "vanity," the word is literally "puff of air." Those who live through a fire will never see the forest return to its adolescence, let alone maturity. For them, what they knew is irrevocably gone. Human lives are not easily attuned to these timescales.

**II. Everyday Life**

The difficulty of thinking in forest time, however, is not simply due to the limits of human perception. Our sense of time is cultural. Sincere attempts to think like a forest are hemmed in by the news cycle and bills that will soon come due. Henri Lefebvre, the heterodox Marxist philosopher, spoke of *le quotidien* ("everyday life"). He used this term to describe the banality of life in post-war capitalism: a life of working and consuming inspired by the mass media and glossy advertising images. He contrasted this shallow seeing and empty time with the agricultural seasons and religious festivals of the village life it had replaced.

In *le quotidien*, our lives float free from the cycles of nature—both their joys and constraints. Berries are always in season at the supermarket. Drought might parch the hills around us, but water flows unabated from our taps—unless, of course, we cannot pay the bill. Even those who live on the forest-civilization boundary

A close-up of a tree charred by the Holiday Farm Fire, which burned 173,000 acres of land ("Bark #25," Blue River, Oregon, 2021)

surrounded by trees seldom truly dwell in the forest. Human loss is evident throughout the firescape: burnt-over foundations lie ringed with a midsummer frost of scattered insulation. But human recovery follows different patterns and timescales than the forest.

The abiding power of everyday life is evident even in the experiences of fire survivors. During interviews, I'd hoped to explore ecological grief, but people's attention was fixed on more immediate demands. After the crisis of the escape comes the need for a laptop and wifi or transportation to work, visits to relief centers and calls to FEMA or insurance companies to cover emergency housing. People who have lived through a life- and landscape-altering catastrophe are forced to spend time arguing with a cable company's demand for the return of an incinerated modem in order to close an account. The collective processing of shared trauma is shattered into individual efforts to return to "normal."

For all its seeming power to disrupt, the conflagration does little to challenge the hegemony of everyday life. Indeed, even the most overwhelming disaster sorts people ever more severely according to its logic. Salvadoran theologian Jon Sobrino has argued that there are few truly *natural* disasters. Social inequalities determine outcomes from the start. Those wealthy enough to afford insurance find temporary housing and begin the long and difficult process of rebuilding. Those without it find their marginalization increased. With their ancestral homes or the only rental they could afford destroyed, and lacking the capital to rebuild, they are stuck in emergency housing far from their communities, with few options to return to their former lives.

The dominance of economic factors is painfully apparent in community visioning sessions which, of necessity, become conversations about what owners with insurance can afford to do.

Those most impoverished by the disaster cannot even participate in these meetings, which require the means to remain in the area or to travel back for them. In the world we have made, towns and communities aren't rebuilt, individual homes and businesses are.

The disciplining power of everyday life is also evident in the experiences of those outside the fire's direct path. Smoke blankets entire regions. Noon-dark skies and unbreathable air could stand as a dire, visceral sign of ecological destruction, but they register largely as disruptors of our routines: hindering commutes, errands, and exercise. Even our sincere attempts to witness such events rarely escape the logic of everyday life. The flow of broadcast and social media constrains our gaze. We watch whatever video footage is available, and struggle to make sense of the chaos. News reporters interview survivors and broadcast official updates on the fire. But there is little opportunity for a contemplative gaze, for deep knowing. Victims' stories come and go. Images provide little context. Even the most overwhelming disaster must yield to the next story in the news cycle. *Le quotidien* marches on.

Of course, modern life influences such disasters on a much deeper level than perception. Our getting and spending takes place within a global system of extraction, descended from colonialism, that is part of both the conditions of wildfires and their recovery. Climate change, born of two centuries of emissions from our industrial civilization, brings record heat and shifts in rain patterns, raising the likelihood of catastrophic fires. So do commercial tree plantations, which differ in structure from natural forests. The former are composed of young trees with thin bark and a single crown level on dry ground that's been stripped of the litter and decomposing logs that hold moisture. Fires spread more rapidly and catastrophically here than in the

That a tenth of the Cascades forest could burn in a little more than a week shows how rapidly these ancient cycles of regrowth could collapse. ("Charred Stump and Wire," Finn Rock Reach, Oregon, 2021)

more complex, mixed natural forests we've nearly logged out of existence. In those few remaining groves, ancient trees often survived with little more than fire-scorching on their thick bark.

An equally profound impact appears in the cycle of restoration, where the boot of the Anthropocene grinds the neck of the forest's ancient processes. Forest ecosystems have evolved to reseed burn zones from surviving remnants and the surrounding forest. Tree and understory species are easily counted and catalogued, but the forest is also composed of tens of thousands of species of mosses, fungi, algae, bacteria, worms, and arthropods. Monoculture tree plantations have been stripped of most of these and thus cannot reseed burnt-over areas as in the past. Record temperatures and droughts stress even mature plants; they are also changing the parameters in which seedlings attempt to grow. Scorched plantations are replanted with commercial seed stock selected a half-century ago to grow quickly in a climate that no longer exists. The limited biodiversity of these plantations' monocultures also deprives the forest of the full range of species from which new ecological communities might emerge for a changed climate. That a tenth of the Cascades forest could burn in a little more than a week shows how rapidly these ancient cycles could collapse.

Finding hope in everyday life is difficult. It is so easily reduced to wishing for a return to "normal." This is precisely the sort of hope that Derrick Jensen has trenchantly criticized: hope that "keeps us chained to the system, the conglomerate of people and ideas and ideals that is causing the destruction of the Earth." But the truth of that admonition must be held in tension with the unequal impact of these disasters. In addition to deeply entrenched patterns of environmental injustice, the violence of the Anthropocene is exposing to disaster new populations who, understandably, want their lives back. The unevenness of ecological collapse will compound the longstanding ecological injustices we already find so easy to ignore.

### III. Apocalyptic

How might we break the spell of the everyday in order to honor these disasters with the attention they deserve? Another biblical tradition—the apocalyptic—offers a very different way of seeing. The word "apocalyptic" comes easily to mind when fire roars on the horizon, ashes fall from the sky, and the sun is cloaked in blood, but it offers a much richer perspective than the movie-theater explosions to which it is often reduced. The word means "revelation" or, perhaps more viscerally, a tearing away of the veil that obscures the truth. Alongside the complex and often lurid imagery in these texts is often a visionary command to see and witness: "Write in a book what you see and send it…." We contemporary witnesses can learn from the apocalyptic a sense of time and a way of seeing attuned to catastrophe, disruption, and discontinuity.

From an environmental perspective, the apocalyptic might seem to be the least helpful way imaginable to approach our ecological crisis. Aren't Christian visions of divine salvation emerging out of fiery destruction precisely the problem? The Book of Revelation certainly portrays humans living on in eternity in a new creation while the old is consigned to oblivion. Chelsea Steinauer-Scudder finds in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic perspectives a shared temporal imagination "in which an exalted and uncomplicated beginning always follows an ending." Trapped in such a view, we can end up accepting extinction and destruction, treating them as necessary turning points in an inevitable cycle of redemption. Simpler still, apocalyptic visions can seem the ultimate deus-ex-machina cheapening of hope that Jensen described: the belief that the system will "inexplicably change" through the salvific intervention of technology, the Great Mother, or Jesus Christ.

Even without such theoretical critiques, however, the apocalyptic is easily dismissed as the province of fundamentalists calculating the day of Armageddon, undeterred by the countless failures of such prophecies to come true. Many modern believers find it to be an embarrassment.

The theologian Johannes Metz was attracted to the apocalyptic precisely because it seemed such an embarrassment to modern sensibilities. He found in the apocalyptic not an anesthetizing reassurance of salvation, but a dangerous challenge to the status quo. Suspicious of the power of dominant stories to gloss over reality, the apocalyptic is attuned to the discontinuities that can disrupt them. Metz drew inspiration from Walter Benjamin's Jewish vision of "messianic time," in which every moment "becomes a gate through which the Messiah enters into history." The apocalyptic in this sense can cultivate attentiveness to those ignored and excluded from triumphalist narratives of progress. Metz describes this aspect of the apocalyptic as "dangerous memory" that "remembers not only the successful, but the destroyed, not only what has been actualized, but what has been lost."

Metz saw in the apocalyptic not a simple fascination with catastrophe, but rather an awareness

**How might we break the spell of the everyday in order to honor these disasters with the attention they deserve?**

**Our moment gives birth to a new figure: the "bystander-for-now," we who watch from near and far, not yet driven from our homes by fire or flood.**

of the catastrophic nature of time itself. An apocalyptic sense of time alerts us to the privileged density of catastrophic moments and can prompt us to attend more carefully to their natural and human dimensions. What knowledge might we allow to enter if we treated the charcoal remains of a burned tree or a survivor's trauma as a gateway for truth that demands our attention?

The apocalyptic, then, teaches a way of seeing: sustained attention to these moments that seeks to understand their deep meaning. In this way, true apocalyptic seeing is the opposite of the filmic portrayals of disaster with which it is often associated. It cultivates a contemplative gaze that lingers to read the signs within the spectacle. It attends to the roar of fire, but abides with the ashes and the tears of those who dwell in them. The apocalyptic calls forth what Metz called a "mysticism of open eyes."

An apocalyptic suspicion of established narratives illuminates our world of shifting climate baselines. As we have seen, massive fires are natural events with a long history. What is different in this moment? How did this fire diverge from past cycles of disturbance? These fires followed record-setting periods of heat and drought in the region. These were not isolated extremes. Precipitation levels have been dropping and summertime atmospheric aridity has been steadily increasing for decades. The fuel for these fires was prepared by the global warming our actions have produced. Weather records broken in that summer of catastrophe were again shattered in the next. How might the changed climate impact recovery? That forest is gone, a different one will replace it. In that disjuncture lies our future.

The effects of the Anthropocene are spread across the globe, dispersed in what Timothy Morton calls a "hyperobject" resistant to human perception. Nevertheless, its violence is felt viscerally by plants withering as deserts spread, starving polar bears separated from their prey by open water, and by the few remaining vaquita tangled in fishing nets thrashing for air as I write. In these fires and floods, the Anthropocene erupts into human experience. We must attend to all the dimensions of our response. In his encyclical letter on the environment, *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis spoke of this emotional dimension of knowledge as becoming "painfully aware" and daring "to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it." Our fears and anxieties are more than a suspension of reason. We should consider them reason's expansion *in extremis*.

For this reason, the trauma of survivors demands our attention. We certainly have a duty to offer them comfort and healing, but more than that, we need to respect their witness as a source of insight and knowledge. As a social species we should view trauma as more than a source of potential individual psychopathology—it has a social function as well. The traumatized bear the wounds of a direct encounter with the destructive forces we have unleashed. Those who have glimpsed the end of the world have much to teach.

What value might the experience of those of us with only peripheral connection to these disasters have, those of us torn between genuine concern and the demands of everyday life? Writing at the height of the Cold War, Thomas Merton noted that

So many of us live on the cusp of these disasters: breathing the smoke of fires that do not reach us. ("Stump Ghost #15," Blue River, Oregon, 2021)

in this fallen world, all bystanders are guilty. Our moment gives birth to a new figure: the "bystander-for-now": we who watch from near and far, not *yet* driven from our homes by fire or flood, or forced to flee our land because of drought, famine, or socioeconomic collapse. So many of us live on the cusp of these disasters: breathing the smoke of fires that do not reach us, watching clouds pass by that will visit tornadoes and floods upon others. The mixture of anxiety and schadenfreude we feel gazing upon others' loss is itself revelatory. In these feelings we know what is happening even if the cycles of daily life prevent us from living out this realization.

What might hope mean in the context of apocalyptic seeing? Thomas Aquinas saw the virtue of hope as a precarious balance between presumption and despair. He defined it as a desire for a future good that is possible but difficult to attain. Hope presumes the ability not only to foresee the desired outcome, but also to understand the obstacles to attaining it. Hope thus requires open eyes, a hard seeing of the truth of circumstance.

To find the truth of our moment beyond the shallow seeing of everyday life, we must cultivate awareness of what is too often pushed to the edges of our vision. Pause. Let the flow of chatter and certainties be interrupted. Let your gaze linger on tears and ashes. Contemplate what is so often ignored. At the end of the world, hope is easily seduced by denial. Only the stricken gaze can find its path in this darkness.

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# Wachapreague

**Rand Richards Cooper**

What Langen noticed most, arriving in his sister's village, was the emptiness. "Little City by the Sea," a peeling sign announced, yet the place was home to just four hundred souls. Around it were fields and marshes, loblolly pines, a scattering of farmhouses and trailers, and every few miles a squat brick Methodist fortress or white-framed Baptist chapel. Langen was unused to sparse places; in Connecticut, they barely existed. WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER! read a billboard he'd seen as he passed through Maryland. Was that true? Mostly people were in this apart. Safety in lack of numbers. And in distance.

The village consisted of two streets running east to the bay and six north-south ones. One crappy motel, a P.O., a marina with a bar and restaurant—closed. A gift shop and gallery, also closed. Every fifth house looked abandoned. That wasn't just the current calamity. The economy had long ago swerved elsewhere; retirees ruled the roost.

He had come to Virginia for a stay of uncertain duration. "Trev!" his sister yelled when he parked the Audi and got out, slipping on his mask as he stood, stiff after a six-hour drive on near-empty interstates. "Air hugs!" She mimicked an embrace.

"Quarantined and tested, so I'm game for the real thing if you are," Langen said, and they hugged. He hadn't touched another human in eight months. Behind them Liddie's two dogs clamored against the fence, whining. The huge hollyhocks loomed, their pink blossoms monstrous.

"Little Shop of Horrors," Langen said, and his sister laughed.

He was relieved to find her in good spirits. Liddie's husband, Jason, had died nine months before, just after Labor Day and his seventieth birthday. Three days of upper-back pain, a fruitless visit to the doctor, ibuprofen, heart attack, bigger heart attack: Langen's phone had rung at 2 a.m. His sister was riding in the ambulance. *I made him a birthday cake*, she said, sobbing. *We just finished it tonight.*

Langen's visit had been planned for the fall, then delayed by the virus. Now, in mid-May, he had decided to go anyway. His brother-in-law had been hoarder-ish, and his sister needed help clearing stuff out. Getting away was the other goal. The virus had raged across greater New York; the new disease made COVID-19 look like a tea party.

"Welcome to Chaosville," Liddie said, as the dogs howled. "Max, CUT IT OUT!" His sister had never had children; dogs were her kids, and he had forgotten how she greeted their every ruckus with fresh, fond scolding. She was sixty-eight, five-and-a-half years older than Langen. Soon she'd be a little old lady with her dogs. If she was lucky.

"By the way, you look great," she said, as he unloaded his bike.

"Deceptive packaging. Don't look inside."

It was true. Langen had already chalked up an impressive list of health crises and interventions, including hip replacement, skin cancer, bilateral cataract removal, and an unexpected coronary misadventure. Like him, his sister had inherited the arthritis gene. Her knees were a mess; descending a staircase she turned sideways and hobbled down. Langen couldn't imagine how she managed her art shows—hauling everything around in her van, setting up tents and displays, breaking it all down again.

All that, of course, was on hold now, indefinitely.

In his sister's years on the Eastern Shore, he had visited just twice, and he was struck anew by the modesty of her life. Her house, a battered ranch, needed paint. The chain-link fence sagged, the driveway lay in bits. In the yard stood the old boat shed where she painted. It had pleased Langen over the years, when asked about his sibling, to say, "She's a painter." Did he mean housepainter?

No, he meant the Van Gogh kind. Indeed, her painting, with its blazes of color, resembled Van Gogh's. She used a palette knife, spreading paint on the canvas like butter. In art and in life, Liddie proceeded with the opposite of Langen's methodical thoroughness. She knew instantly if something felt right, while Langen, newly retired from practicing law, had subsided over the decades into a gradually thickening doubt.

In the shed she showed him her latest works. During the confinement she'd been prolific, her studio crammed with portraits of cows, horses, reptiles, birds, pets.

"I love this room," she said. "I think of it as Noah's ark."

It struck him as too apt, given how things were going in the world.

Later, after Langen unpacked, they opened a bottle of wine—he had brought a mix-and-match case from the dwindling collection in his basement—and made a start on his sister's mountain of stuff. From the garage they hauled boxes onto the lawn, pulling out objects wrapped in newspaper. Mice had feasted, reducing the paper to confetti and leaving seedlike poop behind. From this icky mix they rescued oddments of the Langen family past.

"Oh God, Trev, look." Liddie held up a baggie containing crayons, flattened at their tips. "Remember melting these on your radiator? And how furious Mom got?"

"Your Jackson Pollock phase." Langen pulled out a batik banner Liddie had made in eighth grade, emblazoned with their father's personal mantra. "'The Magic Fingers of the Bone Surgeon,'" he read, holding it up.

Their father, Ted, had been an orthopedic surgeon in Boston. He'd made a good living, but in retirement he bemoaned missing out on the golden age of orthopedic surgery. *These guys today,* he'd rant on the phone from New Mexico. *You're the local hip guy, and you've got a fucking house in Aruba?* Following a lifetime of debonair wit, he had developed a disheveled and raving aspect. After Langen's mother died, Ted had had the good luck to meet Fran; twenty years younger, she doted on him and eventually cared for him. Always a workhorse, at ninety he had hiked and played golf. Then came 2020: a fever, hospitalization, the ventilator. It all happened with stunning suddenness.

"What did we talk about back then?" his sister asked. "The four of us, at dinner."

"We'd each talk about our day, right?" The memory blurred into later scenes of Langen's own family's catch-as-catch-can dinners, him and his ex-wife, Miranda, and their two daughters grabbing a hectic bite at the kitchen snack bar.

"Remember Dad's voices?" Liddie said. "'*Who knows—what evil—lurks—in the hearts of men?*'"

Langen finished it off, sinisterly. "*The SHADOW KNOWS—ah hah hah hah hah!*"

His sister fished out an unopened pack of Silva Thins. Langen recalled their mother's triumph at finally quitting the habit. In the end it got her anyway.

"Jesus. What do I do with all this crap?" Liddie tossed the cigarettes back and stood. "I'll get some dinner ready."

Waiting, Langen surveyed the family archaeology arrayed on the grass around him. He picked up a cracked and stained bong. When he was at Harvard, his sister had lived close by in a cavernous house near Inman Square full of artists and musicians, dedicated stoners all. It was half a mile from Langen's dorm, and he would walk down Cambridge Street on Saturday nights to visit. He tossed the bong back onto the grass. There was so much to get rid of. He remembered the Great Purge, when their mother, a lifelong saver, turned sixty and suddenly began to unload. "Ditch!" she would say, with a strange, fierce jubilance, holding up this or that relic in the attic. Only later did he and his sister understand: she had known what was coming; she had wanted to spare them the task of cleaning up after she was gone.

Sunset approached. In the yard, birds dove at the feeder, a dog snapped at a fly. Langen had nothing to do and nowhere to go. Time seemed to replenish itself, pooling and eddying in the shadows of the yard, as if in one of Liddie's magic landscapes. An illusion of normalcy lingered in places like the village. If you simplified enough, you could create your own bubble. But every bubble had an inside and an outside.

His sister came to the screen door and announced dinner. They ate shrimp and grits and watched the news. It was the usual direness: food rationing, riots, the border lockdown; the death toll approaching 2 million in the U.S. alone. The president, pale and corpselike, spoke from his bunker. He wore an eagle-and-stars mask.

Liddie snapped off the TV. "Enough of that," she said.

After dinner they did the dishes, then watched a movie as Liddie stretched out on the living-room sofa and the dogs assailed Langen on the loveseat. At 9 p.m. his sister limped off, dogs in tow. Langen himself was not much of a sleeper, and typically stayed up late, watching TV or reading or talking on the phone with his daughters. He decided they didn't need a brooding late-night call from him tonight, and texted instead. *Hey Guys, I'm in VA with Aunt Liddie, we're fine, Be Safe, Love, Dad.* During the first pandemic his younger daughter, Serena, had fled grad school to stay with him, and for ten weeks the two of them had made the most of it, cooking, watching movies, hanging out. The 2020 crisis had brought a sense of heroic coping, even adventure. Not this time.

He turned off the light. Through the picture window, a lone streetlamp cast a feeble bluish glow. He imagined it going off; imagined all of them going off, hundreds of millions of lights extinguished one by one, coast to coast.

Some time passed—he might have dozed, he wasn't sure. On a shelf he found a bottle of his late brother-in-law's Scotch. In the bathroom he took his heart meds from the pillbox, the sequence of opened compartments reminding him that it was Tuesday PM. Strange, after all the decades of tightly scheduled work, to think that his only calendar now was a pillbox. Langen's nightly allotment was a blood thinner and the horse pill of a statin. He washed them down with a fiery shot of Laphroaig, imagining with pleasure his cardiologist's disapproval, and went to bed.

**Out here he could feel the starkness of country life—the isolation, the immediacy of everything, your small house, your tidy garden, your propane tank.**

THE TWO OF THEM DEVELOPED A DAILY routine. It began with walking the dogs through the village to what his sister called the Magic Pennies: a pair of coins, sunk in a street on the far side of town. Stepping on them for luck was a local custom.

"Maybe we should sit on them," Langen suggested.

The rest of the day mixed chores and errands with trips to the dump, meals, and bike rides for Langen while his sister painted. He took country roads along the coastline, with views across marshes and tidal creeks to barrier islands. Few souls were about. In Connecticut he would hew to the tightrope of a narrow bike lane amid a roaring rush of traffic, but on these lonely roads he was king. He cycled through tiny hamlets, Chancetown and Locustville, Temperanceville and Oyster, that were little more than the road signs announcing them. Out here he could feel the starkness of country life—the isolation, the immediacy of everything, your small house, your tidy garden, your propane tank. Hot water: you need it, you fire it up. Grow a tomato, eat a tomato; kill a chicken, eat a chicken. There was an aura of self-sufficiency and tightly guarded shelter. You could hunker down with your garden and your gun, far from the cities and the florid, ever-amplifying source.

Yet even here it had arrived. His third day out riding, he rounded a bend and found himself before a row of immense red barns. The poultry plants had begun appearing ten years ago, his sister had told him, when Tyson and Perdue set their sights on the Eastern Shore. A family farm would be bought, and overnight came the giant barns. The plants proliferated, along with their fallout. Langen had noticed it: the wind would shift, and a waft of rancid air shoved by. It was literally a shitstorm. Chicken sludge containing dander, feathers, blood and, yes, chickenshit, was pumped from the slaughterhouses as fertilizer. And shit wasn't the worst of it. Langen had done some googling. At one plant nearby, aliment—a highly acidic liquid food supplement—had leached into a wastewater treatment system, where it killed bacteria that reduced ammonia in water discharged into a creek. That in turn killed some two hundred thousand fish.

"I would sue the hell out of these people," Langen had told Liddie.

"Do it!" His sister was enthusiastic. "Everyone hates them. One time they spilled gunk on the road from one of their trucks, and a guy drove over it and crashed. Death by chicken fat."

Now Langen sipped from his water bottle and studied the red barns, huge exhaust fans projecting from their sides like rocket engines. A gaily painted sign announced, "Summer Rest." For whom? he wondered. Not the workers, that was for sure. Each of those plants, he had read, held fifty thousand chickens, the processing line speeding them by, a hundred per minute. Workplace distancing was impossible. In 2020 the toll among poultry workers had been bad, and this time was far worse.

In the adjacent field stood a row of featureless trailers. They housed migrant laborers, his sister had said, mostly Mexicans. The first trailer was larger than the others. A black hound dog sat on a chain, eyeing him. As Langen eyed him back, a man came out. "Can I help you?" he called. He wore a skull-and-crossbones mask and carried a shotgun. He wasn't threatening Langen, exactly, just showing him.

"Just stopped for a drink of water. My sister lives back in town." Langen nodded in the direction he had come from. "I'm visiting."

"Oh. Well, in that case." The man's expression softened; he seemed embarrassed. "You enjoy your day, sir," he said, and went back into his trailer.

Langen hopped on his bike, and seconds later, back in the serene countryside, it was as if the poultry plant was a bad dream. His sister had done a painting of one of the chicken houses, a visible miasma wreathing it in lurid crimson. She titled the painting "Blood Red." Langen noticed that she kept it half-hidden in a corner of her studio. Despair and anger were not her usual themes.

His phone vibrated, and he pulled over. His older daughter, Chloe, calling from LA. "Hey honey," he said.

"Hi Dad. Where are you?" Ever since his heart escapade, his daughters had treated him with touching solicitude.

"I'm riding my bike. Right now I'm standing by a cornfield near a place called Chancetown. Which is near nowhere, basically."

"That sounds like fun." Something in his daughter's voice alerted him, and Langen asked what was wrong.

"Nothing really," she said.

"Nothing *really*? Is Audrey okay?" Chloe was a lawyer, her partner, Audrey, a social worker; together they ran a community legal services counseling center.

"Audrey's fine. We're fine. I don't know." His daughter heaved a quavery sigh. "Audrey's cousin died. In San Diego. She was in the ambulance for eight hours outside the hospital. They wouldn't let her in. And then our neighbors got broken into. Jill and Jerome. They're our best friends." Chloe and Audrey lived in a small Victorian house near Dodger Stadium, part of a gentrifying wave in a neighborhood long known for gangs. The break-in had happened at 2 a.m., she told him; her friends had bolted their bedroom door and cowered while the thieves noisily carted away TV, computers, microwave. "They called 911, but nobody came. I read that half the LAPD has quit or is sick. I don't know, Dad. It's all just a big nightmare."

Langen felt helpless. "I want you to be safe," he said. "You need to be safe."

"Well, we do have Rufus." A new bulldog puppy. "But he doesn't really bark yet, just eeps and yeeps. Audrey and I keep saying, Rufus, grow up, we need you *now*!"

Only when his daughter laughed did Langen hear that she had been crying. "I'm sorry, Dad," she sniffled. "You don't need my bullshit."

"It's exactly what I need." Langen gathered his thoughts. "Here's what I want you to do. If the situation gets any worse out there, I want you and Audrey to leave. Come to me. Go to Serena in Bozeman. Or go to your mother. Just pack everything in your van and drive, and keep driving until you get to one of us. You promise me?"

"I promise." His daughter cleared her throat. "How's Aunt Liddie? Is she still painting animals? Does she know about Petey the Kangaroo?"

"Petey who?"

"The kangaroo. The one in Florida that escaped. He's hopping around like—hold on a sec."

He heard background noise, and when his daughter came back, she was all business. "Dad, I gotta go. Talk soon, okay? And will you please take care of yourself? You are *not* allowed to let Heinie get you!"

They said their goodbyes, and Langen put his phone away. He winced to think about Chloe and Audrey in their cute cottage off Sunset Boulevard. The world had become a place where almost anything could happen at almost any time. Staccato pops in the night: Were they firecrackers or gunfire? Would the police come if you needed them? Would firefighters? He recalled when his daughters were young, and Chloe an anxious sleeper. Robbers, kidnappers, assassins creeping up the roof with poison blowdarts: she'd appear at his and his wife's bedside in the middle of the night. *Don't worry,* he would say, bringing her back to her room. *Nothing can get us here*. Tucking her into her bed and stroking her forehead.

Langen found himself recalling a conversation with his own father. Weeks into the Covid outbreak, Ted was still going to cocktail parties, showing a physician's bluff disregard for medical risks. *Dad*, Langen had lectured him, *you have to be careful with this thing. You're low-hanging fruit!* Now, just four years later, it was his turn; now he was the one ripe for picking. The sickness began with headache and proceeded to diarrhea and vomiting, raging fevers, organ damage. In lab photos the virus looked harmless, its rod-and-chain structure strangely jewelry-like, a pile of bracelets and pearl necklaces. It had originated in pigeons, or geese, or a bioweapons lab. Its lethality rate was 15 percent. There was no real treatment. *I want you to be safe*, he had told his daughter. But being safe was not an option. There was only being scared. That, and falling ill, and dying alone in a strange hospital with no one who loved you present.

Langen considered calling his ex-wife, but thought better of it and called his other daughter, Serena, instead. Her phone was off—she was often out of range, up in the mountains with her boyfriend—and he left a message. He put his phone away and looked around. Before him was a ramshackle farmhouse, apparently uninhabited. A plow, rusted and overgrown, stood abandoned in the adjacent field—left in mid-furrow, as if whoever had been using it years before had abruptly fled, never to return.

As he stood there, a raccoon emerged from the grass and tiptoed, with comical villainy, across the road. Was that normal, in broad daylight? Beyond the farmhouse a bank of honeysuckle spilled forth. Langen mounted his bike and rode on, through the sickly-sweet perfume. Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed a wooden cross sticking up out of the bush, its top barely visible, drowning amid the blooms.

**HE HAD TOLD HIS SISTER HE WOULD SUE THE** poultry companies, but with the career he'd actually had, Langen more likely would have been defending them.

He had never intended to become a lawyer. The plan was to be a doctor like his father; *I hope a career in medicine will suture liking*, a high-school classmate punned in his yearbook. But Langen had preferred the neatness of concepts and arguments to the messiness of blood and tissue. He could no longer recall how he had once envisioned the life of a trial lawyer; presumably a daily drama of courtroom battles and eloquent summations. In reality, a litigator's work was mundane. Yet he had enjoyed it—doing case assessments, drafting discovery motions, prepping witnesses, leveraging settlements—and over time he'd won a name for himself. There was the story in the *Hartford Courant*, headlined "Sword and Shield," profiling Langen and another partner. The partner was the firm's lead plaintiff attorney, and thus the Sword.

Langen was the Shield.

His daughters had been teenagers when the article came out, and on his forty-fifth birthday they presented him with a medieval shield. He'd been led blindfolded into the garage

**They heard the telltale buzz of a delivery. Overhead a black drone zoomed off. Langen's sister went around to the front and came back carrying a package and her decontaminating kit.**

to receive it, a massive thing of wood and leather, emblazoned with a gothic L and coat of arms. In truth, Langen had not made his name through any gladiatorial heroics. Being a litigator was more like being a storyteller. Using statutes and precedents, evidence and arguments, you created a story and told it, presenting a version of reality that excluded other, competing versions. Legal judgment took place within a series of artificial enclosures: in conference rooms and courtrooms; in the carefully constructed box of a legal brief. Langen had never been self-deceiving enough to view this as justice pure and simple.

In his retirement he found himself returning to two cases in particular. One involved chlorinated solvents, volatile compounds used to clean industrial machinery. The solvents traveled readily into water supplies, and in the nineties the belief spread that they caused cancer. A group of residents in a gritty ex-mill town had sued one company that made the solvents and another that used them. Langen had defended the companies and their insurers. In court, he demolished every link the plaintiff's lawyers tried to make between the solvents and their clients' illnesses: the science wasn't there, he argued, the EPA hadn't weighed in. Causality could never be assumed from mere contiguity; if you can't show me how X did Y to produce Z, it didn't happen. Later, the Sword and Shield article would depict the moment when Langen produced a handful of soil, ostensibly from the contested site (it was, in fact, from his backyard) and told the court, "You could eat this dirt, and nothing would happen to you, except that you would be eating dirt." The jury agreed and found for the defendants.

The other case had begun in horror-movie fashion, when a suburban couple remodeling their home removed a ground-floor wall and were astonished to see hundreds of photos tumble out—Polaroid snapshots of naked children. It turned out that a prior owner of the house, dead for years, had been the chief endocrinologist at one of the city's hospitals, and under pretense of conducting medical research had sexually abused dozens of children, immuring a cache of incriminating photos in his house. The case gained national notoriety, and the victims sued for hundreds of millions of dollars.

Defending the hospital, Langen had acknowledged the heinousness of the doctor's crimes, then addressed the principle of *respondeat superior*—let the master answer—to take on the question of legal responsibility. Meticulously he distinguished negligence from criminality. If you owned a trucking company, he argued, and one of your drivers drove too fast on a wet road, injuring someone, then clearly you were responsible. But what if your employee, with no history of violence, pulled out a gun and shot someone? Criminality is an unpredictable anomaly; with no reason to suspect that the doctor was a sexual predator, the hospital could not be held legally responsible.

Despite intense publicity in the case, Langen was able to force a minimal settlement. His opponent was a plaintiff's lawyer known for his flamboyance (ponytail, cowboy boots, Italian suits) and incessant media-seeking. Langen was highly allergic to the man, and savored his victory, as he had in the industrial solvents suit. Yet over time, his view of both cases changed. In the industrial case, studies eventually showed that the solvents could in fact cause cancer. As for the sexual-abuse suit, years later it came back to him when a fellow member at his country club committed suicide, and an acquaintance disclosed that the man had been one of Dr. X's first victims. "He thought time would heal," said the friend, who seemed not to know Langen's role in the case. "But that kind of thing is like cancer." The man had killed himself with a shotgun on his front lawn on a snowy day. He had two daughters in middle school.

Langen had always felt contempt for the money-grubbing, spotlight-seeking kind of lawyer, but looking back, he wondered if he had been worse. What he had he cared about, he'd told himself during his career, was jurisprudence itself—the consistency of law, the quality of judgment. That made little sense to him anymore. He had been self-righteous in doubtful causes and had defended the already well-defended; he had ransacked his education for instrumental purposes. It pained him to picture himself as a freshman at Harvard, sitting in T. M. Scanlon's Intro to Moral Philosophy class in

Emerson Hall, scribbling notes. At the time he had thought he was pursuing wisdom. In fact, he had been assembling weapons. He wondered what kind of person he would have become if he had made different decisions in his life. Or was it the other way around?

As a white, male, Ivy-educated American lawyer, Langen had understood he was the beneficiary of a lopsided system of rewards. Accordingly, he had taken on his share of pro bono work; had volunteered; had embraced fundraisers and charities. He had given back. He had been able to uphold an idea of himself and feel justified.

That was the problem. That, and cancer that flows through the ground, or a man who scatters his brains on his snow-covered lawn for his daughters to find.

**THEY INVITED HIS SISTER'S AUSTRIAN FRIEND, HELGA,** to dinner. She came through the back gate promptly at 5 p.m. and stood waiting in the yard. No one came to the front door anymore; it seemed to Langen that he could barely recall the days of ringing doorbells and a surge of people into the living room.

Helga was an attractive older woman with perfect posture, ice-blue eyes, and a silver Doris Day–like bob. She wore a mask bearing an image of the Rock of Gibraltar, and carried two bottles of wine and a platter of schnitzel bedecked with lemon wedges. Despite having lived in the U.S. for half a century, Helga retained a comically heavy German accent, like the movie villains of Langen's youth. Her last name was polysyllabic and unreproducible. It was a funny name even in German, she said; it literally meant "thunder weather."

"Nice to meet you, Frau Thunder Weather," Langen said.

She had a surprising, fruity laugh. Thunder Weather had been her husband's name, and she'd kept it when they divorced. "It is the one enjoyable thing I received from him. Along with my house."

They ate at a weatherbeaten picnic table, Helga distanced at the far end. Liddie and Helga were part of a group of women called The Liars Club. The name derived from a sign formerly posted by the town gas station, now long closed, where men would sit around and jaw. The sign remained for years, until one night when, under cover of darkness, the women took it. Helga had it at her house. "I keep it hidden," she said. "They would not appreciate such insolence from the come-heres."

The village was divided into "born-heres" and "come-heres," and the Liars Club were all come-heres. They met to take walks or to garden; they read books together, dined and drank together. But the group had dwindled. One had gone to stay with her kids when the new virus hit. Another had dementia. A third had cancer. "Lydia and I are the last two remaining Liars," said Helga. "And your sister typically tells the truth."

Over dinner the two women parsed village sociology for Langen's benefit. The born-heres did the real estate, the policing and plumbing and tax collecting. The come-heres spent money. Helga and her ex had bought their house in 1973 as a getaway. The town had lost a lot in half a century, she said. "Back then we had the school, the movie theater, the stores, the oyster shacks. The Ocean House." Langen had seen the old Ocean House Hotel photos: a Saratoga-style ocean liner of a place, built in 1900 to attract Northerners of leisure. All of it was gone now, his sister said. People had stopped coming. Tourists wanted beaches, not marshes. There were also environmental factors. Land use had ruined the bay, Helga explained—soil, fertilizer and pesticide runoff silting the creeks and choking off the vertical mixing that brings oxygen to the depths. "The fertilizer feeds algae, which blocks light and photosynthesis. Eventually the bottom-dwelling plants die, and oysters and crabs too. The water is a living being. It must breathe." For decades, the potato grower's pesticide of choice had been a compound of arsenic and copper marketed as Paris Green. Helga chortled. "A lovely name for a poison, no?"

When Liddie cleared plates away, Helga leaned over, slipping her mask on. "I was anxious for your sister when Jason died," she said. "But she keeps always moving forward. And she cherishes her friendships." She lowered her voice, as if confiding a secret. "My friend Amy used to stay frequently with me. She died in the last crisis, like your father. Now I have her three cats. And I don't even really like cats."

Liddie returned, carrying a cake with a lit candle. "Happy *Geburtstag*!" she said.

Helga blew it out, harrumphing in a friendly way. "I really preferred nothing to be done," she said. "When you are becoming eighty-five, you're not eager to be festive."

"Eighty-five?" Langen felt disbelief.

She nodded. "My mother became pregnant two weeks before the Germans went into Poland. My father was in the army and soon to leave. I am a true war baby."

Over dessert Helga delved into the wartime, when she and her siblings were sent to live with relatives in the countryside. "I recall the planes overhead, the bomber planes. That was you Americans." She smiled. "In Vienna there was no food, but in the country we had animals and gardens. My job was to go to the forest for firewood. And to feed pigs. My mother the whole time was in a state of panic. Without my father she was helpless." She held up the second bottle. "Austrian *Weissburgunder,* my last two bottles. My friend presented a case of it to me, five years ago today. Then nine months later she died."

"These were your last bottles?" said Langen. "Don't you want to save them?"

Helga shrugged. "For what?" She uncorked it with a resounding *thwop*! "You know, when we heard those planes, when I was a child, we feared the world would end. And eighty years later, here I am."

Strangely enough, they heard the telltale buzz of a delivery. Overhead a black drone zoomed off. Langen's sister went around to the front and came back carrying a package and her decontaminating kit. "It's for you and me," she said to Langen as she swabbed the package down.

**He thought about the rabbits who lived under the shed, and the fox who stalked them; the bobcat who made an occasional appearance. The first pandemic had seen a big uptick in animal activity, and this time it was bigger still.**

It was from Chloe, a pair of medical masks, one embroidered with a bottle of wine, the other a glass. *To Dad and Aunt Liddie*, the note said, *Vintage Family*.

"How did she know we'd be drinking wine right now?" Langen asked.

"We're *always* drinking wine, Trevor," said his sister.

"I know you have two daughters," Helga said. "Are they all right?"

"Serena and her boyfriend live in Montana. They're out in the woods a lot, so I don't worry much. But Chloe and Audrey in LA, I do worry. It's bad out there."

"And in New England, where you live?" Helga asked. "How is it there?"

Langen cited recent numbers trending in a possibly hopeful direction.

"I don't believe it." Helga waved a hand. "It's all propaganda." It was like the poultry plants, she said. "I am convinced that workers are falling sick and dying. Dying *routinely*. But they take them away in the night. A company vehicle pulls up, and leaves, and nobody knows."

Langen related his encounter with the suspicious security guard.

"He perhaps assumed you were a journalist. You are lucky he didn't shoot you." She sighed. "It seems that yesterday people chased one of the Mexican workers away from the convenience station." That was the local, curious name for the dump, Langen had learned. "I think they might have killed him if they caught him."

His sister produced a sound of rash disbelief. "Why, in God's name?" she said. "What's wrong with people?"

"They are afraid," Helga said. "Afraid of the infection."

"They should be," Langen said. "We all should be."

"But what the hell are we supposed to do?" his sister said. "Just wait until some mob of yahoos breaks the door down? Or until this thing gets us and we get dumped in some tent outside the hospital? I do not want to be dumped somewhere and *triaged*."

"I will not let that happen," Helga said. "I have a plan." She was keeping a bottle of pills in her bedside table, she explained.

"Pills?" his sister said. "For what?"

"They are medications remaining from my back surgery and from Amy's anxiety. So we will be collaborating even at the end. Amy's pills plus my pills plus a glass of champagne."

"You mean, kill yourself?" Liddie said. "No, Helga. I'm sorry. We can't just give up."

"I don't view it that way. I view it as preserving a decision that belongs to me in the first place. It belongs to me as a free human being."

Liddie was shaking her head. "It's not right," she said. "Things will get better."

"Perhaps. But perhaps not." Helga spoke with calm certitude, and Langen saw that she was choosing her words carefully. "In my opinion, the one thing that distinguishes a human from an animal is the capacity to choose. To be aware, and to choose. If I relinquish my awareness, if I relinquish my capacity to choose, I am relinquishing my humanity. I am eighty-five years old, Lydia. There is no reason for me to allow that." She offered a gentle smile. "And I am told it will be a simple thing. One just falls asleep."

"I'm sorry, but that's not a plan, Helga." Langen recognized a panicky fury that his sister was prone to under stress. "That's self-euthanasia. It's like some Nazi thing."

"I disagree." On Helga's face Langen registered a flicker of annoyance. "But perhaps shall we not discuss such gloomy topics? As my late former husband would say, Your birthday is your mirthday."

"Mirthday," Langen repeated. "That's actually pretty witty."

"Yes, he was quite pleased with himself. It was his first wordplay in English."

"Well, Happy mirthday, Frau Thunder Weather," Langen said, raising his glass. "May you enjoy many more."

When Helga left, the two Langens stayed outside talking. "I'm an idiot," Liddie said. "I should never have said that."

"I don't think she took it personally," said Langen.

"I'm not sure how else she could take it. Her father was a Nazi. She told me about it once. He was in that organization. You know, with the black uniforms."

"The S.S."

His sister nodded. "One time after the war was over, Helga caught him in the attic, putting the uniform on. He saved it. This was years later. She made him throw it away." She sighed. "I kind of hate myself right now. She's my best friend."

"I wouldn't worry about it. She knows how good a friend you are." Langen sipped wine and pondered the contrast between his and Liddie's serene suburban childhood in the 1960s and Helga's twenty years earlier, amid privation and war.

"Do you think she'd really do it?" his sister said.

He thought about it. "She's a formidable woman. She reminds me of some judges I've known."

"I think maybe she's gay. When she calls Amy, 'my friend,' I think in German it's more like, 'my lover.'" Liddie shrugged. "She doesn't talk about it."

The sun was down, soon the fireflies would be out. Langen poured the last of the wine provided by Helga's dead lover.

"What do you think they'd be doing now?" his sister said. "Mom and Dad, I mean. How do you think they'd deal with all this?"

"Dad wasn't great with situations where he couldn't do anything. Classic surgeon's mentality. But I don't think he'd be scared. At least, he wouldn't have shown it. Who knows what actually went on inside him?"

"God, remember the whole floozy thing? His Little Tramp?"

Langen smiled. It had been a rocky passage in their parent's marriage—their father's dalliance with a nurse, followed by colossal battles and Ted's ejection from the house. In a sensational turn of events, the nurse's pickup-driving, ex-Navy husband had shown up at their father's dismal bachelor pad, where an actual fight had ensued. Riotously Langen and his sister, then in their twenties, had playacted their father grappling with the boyfriend, pleading, *Don't hurt my fingers*! The sorry episode had ended not long afterward, on Thanksgiving, with their father skulking home.

"Remember how we thought Mom would lop his head off when he came crawling back? But then she just hands him his drink and says, 'Edward, nice to see you again. *Especially* on Turkey Day.'"

"That grin on her face," Langen said. "I never knew it was possible to combine menace and mirth in one look."

They were quiet. "How do you do that?" his sister said, after a while.

"Do what?"

"Always come up with a perfect way of saying things. 'Menace and mirth.'"

"Must be that pricey education of mine."

"No, really, I mean it."

Langen shrugged. "It's only words," he said.

They sat silently. Through the window of the studio Langen could see his sister's paintings, lit up in a spotlight. He had left Connecticut one week ago. Three times he had accessed his home-security system, the cameras showing nothing unusual. He thought about the rabbits who lived under the shed, and the fox who stalked them; the bobcat who made an occasional appearance. The first pandemic had seen a big uptick in animal activity, and this time it was bigger still. He wondered what intruders might have breached his home, human or otherwise.

Liddie reached out and patted his shoulder. "I know it's weird to say this, but you've always been my rock, Trevor. Even when you were fifteen and I was twenty."

"Really? How?"

"I don't know. You always had an answer."

Langen pondered. "It didn't feel like that. Not to me, anyway."

Before calling it a night, they took a selfie. "We're so *old*," his sister said, studying it. It was true. Liddie's once-red hair was mostly white; Langen's, while still brown, had thinned to nearly nothing on top. Both had their mother's mouth—the long and curvy upper lip, the Cheshire-cat grin they'd called the Lyle Smile, after their mother's family. Back in the day, Liddie had deployed that grin to seduce men, while in Langen's case it had ignited more than a few grade-school fistfights ("What the fuck are *you* smiling at?"); later, as a lawyer, he'd made an effort to superimpose some gravity.

They took another selfie with their wine masks on, for Chloe.

"I forgot," Langen said. "Chloe wants you to know about Petey the Kangaroo." He related the story. "She thought maybe you'd do a Petey painting."

They went inside, and Langen turned on the news. Daily U.S. deaths had hit 12,000. The White House was announcing a $20 trillion Marshall Plan for America. Progress continued in the quest for a vaccine. The spokeswoman wore a Stars and Stripes mask. Liddie muted the sound, and Langen watched the spokeswoman's neatly plucked eyebrows going up and down.

"Why is it called Heinie, anyway?" his sister asked. "I know it's H and N, but what do they stand for?"

"Hemagglutinin and neura something," Langen said. He thought about Helga, the doomsday pills stashed in her bedside table. "They're proteins."

"Who would have thought we could get this screwed by a protein?" Liddie turned off the TV. "Let's find out about Petey." She took out her phone, and in short order had fetched up a website, wherespetey.com. "So it turns out Petey's a red kangaroo." She read from the site. "'Their bounding gait can cover twenty-five feet in a single leap.' Petey's a bounder!"

"Faster than a speeding bullet," Langen said. "Leaps tall buildings in a single bound!"

Night fell, and they spent a half-hour ignoring global calamity and focusing instead on the adventures of a marsupial on the lam.

**THE SECOND PART OF THIS STORY WILL APPEAR IN THE APRIL ISSUE.**

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**RAND RICHARDS COOPER**'s *fiction has appeared in* Harper's, GQ, Esquire, *the* Atlantic, *and many other magazines, as well as in* Best American Short Stories. *His novel,* The Last to Go, *was produced for television by ABC. Rand has been a writer-in-residence at Amherst and Emerson colleges, and is a longtime contributing editor to* Commonweal.

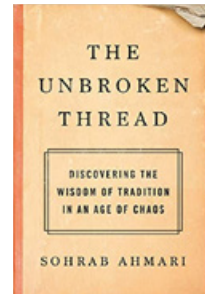
# One More Lifeless Idol

DANIEL WALDEN

There's a staple of conservative polemics, from criticism of the French Revolution to the complaints of the *National Review*, that blames nearly all the ills of modern life on unrestrained individualism—a predicament that can be addressed only by deliberately immersing ourselves in tradition and allowing ourselves to be shaped by the consensus of the past. It was not surprising, then, to find this well-worn thesis in Sohrab Ahmari's latest book, *The Unbroken Thread*. A contributing editor to the *American Conservative*, Ahmari can be regularly found in the pages of various right-wing publications espousing strongly anti-liberal and anti-democratic views. In recent years, he's undergone a dizzying series of ideological transformations, most recently, and infamously, offering views that often overlap with "Catholic integralism," the belief that nation-states should be explicitly subject in both political and spiritual matters to the Roman Catholic Church.

Ahmari wrote *The Unbroken Thread* for his son Max: the book's chapters cover a series of twelve "questions" that Max and other children will have to grapple with as they grow up, with a letter to Max serving as the book's epilogue. These questions are, according to Ahmari, some of the fundamental questions to which "liberal modernity" provides inadequate or destructive answers, and for which "tradition" proves to be a more reliable guide. Each chapter deals with a single question and focuses on a single thinker, sometimes in dialogue with an opponent, who can help a young person come to grips with the world and its hazards. All this seems relatively straightforward, but this is the structure of a self-help book, not a guide to the intellectual and moral resources of the past. Indeed, to call this a "traditional" book at all is a misnomer: it is a thoroughly modern book addressing modern problems in a modern style. Nor is it "traditional" in the sense of drawing on the ways of living and thinking from a specific tradition in which the author is especially learned or conversant: the guiding thinkers of each chapter range from Master Kong of the Confucian tradition to St. Augustine of Hippo of the early Christian tradition all the way into the twentieth century with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and Andrea Dworkin. Such a disparate cast of sages speaks well of Ahmari's reading habits, but it can hardly be called any kind of unified tradition. Instead, what these authorities share most in common is not an intellectual lineage but a certain amount of cultural cachet: they signal intellectual seriousness to a middle-class audience insecure enough both to buy a fancified self-help book and to want its true genre concealed beneath a list of familiar names from the spines of the Harvard Classics or the Great Books of the Western World.

This fixation on an inchoate and underdeveloped conception of "tradition" is far from unique to Ahmari: most appeals to tradition ground themselves in a false or facile picture of what "tradition" entails. This is partly a function of viewpoint, for deep immersion in a particular tradition ultimately erases the distinction between "tradition" and "living"—one




**THE UNBROKEN THREAD**
Discovering the Wisdom of Tradition in an Age of Chaos

SOHRAB AHMARI
Convergent Books
$27 | 320 pp.

BRIAN ZAK

Sohrab Ahmari

loses the outsider's vantage point, succumbing to the same difficulties as the fish who is asked what it means to live in water. The longing for "traditional" ways of living is present only when we lack them, or lack the things that we believe they enabled. "Our conception of freedom," writes Ahmari, "can't make good sense of a vast range of ties that bound traditional peoples: folkways and folk wisdom, family loyalty, unchosen religious obligations such as baptism and circumcision, rule-bound forms of worship, and above all, submission to moral and spiritual authorities."

I am quite sympathetic to Ahmari's desire for thick community, and I'm not the only one on the political Left who feels that way. Many of us came to our politics precisely because we *do* sense that we have unchosen obligations to the people around us, and some people may have childhood memories of strong neighborhood or community bonds that made it easy for them to wander around safely, or of large family gatherings that included people who were not blood relatives but might as well have been. People *should* be able to let their children wander freely around safe neighborhoods; they should be able to form strong relationships with their neighbors and fellow local citizens, go to silly productions at the community theater, and shop for the things they need at stores owned and run by people who live alongside them. And if the community where they live doesn't provide what they need to be happy, they should be able to find one that does. I am sure that such communities, were people able to live in them, would develop local traditions and institutions that would help cement people's connection to one another, and I view it as the role of the state to underwrite the basic necessities of life for every person precisely so that we will be free to form the sorts of communities that will nourish us and let us form the loving relationships that sustain human life.

Because I share this sympathy, I was disappointed to see that Ahmari's book has very little to do with the kinds of social and economic structures that are necessary to sustain tightly-knit communities, and, instead, dwells on the thoughts and conduct of individuals. This is true even of his chapter—by far the best in the book—on observing the Sabbath. Drawing on the thought of Abraham Joshua Heschel, the philosopher and rabbi who marched with Martin Luther King Jr. at Selma, Ahmari takes up the question, "Why would God want you to take a day off?" For observant Jews like Rabbi Heschel, the prohibitions of the Sabbath are famously broad, and yet many of them describe it as the culmination of their weeks, when they are freed from the demands of work or lengthy travel and forced to enjoy the company of friends and family or elemental pleasures like walking and reading. But this emphasis already begins to undermine Ahmari's project, because although many premodern societies had cycles of work and rest built into the calendar, the Jewish observance of the Sabbath is *extremely* specific, rooted in the religious development of a particular people. "Disconnecting" and taking a day off are beneficial practices, but to observe the Sabbath according to rabbinic Judaism marks a person as a member of a community in ways that are readily visible both to other Jews and to gentiles. It reaffirms the connection of Jews to other Jews both historically and geographically; indeed, the specific observance of the Sabbath was so important to some Jewish families, like that of Nuyorican activist Benjamin Melendez, that they continued to do so in secret even into the 1970s, nearly five hundred years after their families had supposedly converted to Christianity under the threat of expulsion or death.

This illustrates one of the major errors of Ahamri's book, one it shares with many other conserative appeals to tradition: it is *communities* that generate meaningful traditions, not the other way around. Instituting a mandatory national day off from most work—really, reinstating blue laws—might very well be helpful to many people's well-being, but it will not create the kind of thick communal bonds that Ahmari admires. It was the communities to which they belonged that gave meaning to Heschel's and Melendez's observance of the Sabbath, although one was public and the other secret. Outside Jewish communities, lighting candles and saying a blessing before the sun sets on Friday evening seems like a pleasant way to mark the beginning of a weekend; within those communities, it communicates an entry into sacred time, a last fire at the threshold of the day on which no fire will be lit. Ahmari would like the observance of a day of rest to mean something more than just taking a break, and because he is an observant Catholic, I have no doubt that in his family or in his parish it *does* mean more. The context of those communities allows taking a particular day off from work to convey something extra, something that affirms what it means to be a member of *this* family, of *this* parish, of *this* church. We do not so much make this kind of meaning as allow it to grow over us, and this growth requires both time and the right soil. We can no more impose a national Sabbath than we can grow lilies in the desert.

Ahmari sometimes seems to grasp such a living view of tradition, but more often he seems to view tradition as a fence or wall around human life—whether this wall is intended to keep us within certain bounds or keep something out is impossible to say. Nowhere is this more obvious than in his chapter that asks, "Should you think for yourself?" He spends much of its pages relaying a potted biography of St. John Henry Newman, whose conversion to Catholicism caused an enormous scandal in the Church of England. One of the points that led to this conversion, and one that Ahmari wants to amplify, was Newman's becoming convinced that the ongoing development of Christian doctrine—its ability to take in new ideas and new circumstances while remaining distinctively Christian—required an authority capable of pronouncing final judgment when a doctrinal dispute had played out; he found this authority in the Catholic Church. It is salutary, Ahmari argues, for the human

conscience to have such an authority, as when parents help form the moral faculties of their children. But this authority, he thinks, functions properly only when it is absolute. "To protect the free conscience, we must ring it with true and tested guardians.... We must treat those guardians as absolute—lest our defensive barrier give way to the battering ram of external powers (tyrants, advertisers, demagogues, etc.), or lest the counterfeit conscience subvert the true one."

This is really the ultimate function of the nebulous "tradition" to which Ahmari's entire book appeals: to provide such a ring around human judgment and prevent it from coming to conclusions that he finds unpalatable. Now, I don't at all think that having moral authorities is a bad thing; I would hardly be a Catholic if I did. I *do* think everyone needs ways to test and criticize their judgments, and regular recourse to respected authorities whose judgment we trust, even and especially when they disagree with us, is vital for honing our own ability to judge and act. But what Ahmari seems to want—a kind of safe haven for the human conscience, a way to protect it from making foolish or wicked choices—is simply not available. In this respect he is too inattentive to the doctrine of original sin: the human conscience has no unfailing bulwark against evil, because our desires themselves are already corrupt. In desiring to follow the instructions even of an infallible Church, we can continue to neglect our duties to friends and family, to deny the poor their due, and to delight in the sheer exercise of power over our fellow persons. Whether you guard your conscience with the writings of great spiritual masters or with the canon of Marxism-Leninism, you will not rid yourself of wishing evil for yourself and for your fellow people: you will never be free of self-destructive impulses, or of the desire to treat persons as things, or of the temptation to secure your safety by violence against other people rather than take the risks of friendship and love. That kind of freedom requires a much more radical transformation, one that Christians profess is only possible by the grace of God that, in any case, manifests itself not in shutting ourselves off from the world but in a love so all-embracing that it can lead us to die for the sake of people who will curse our names through the centuries. There is not and can never be safety in learning to be fully human.

We should not forget that securing his own sense of physical and moral safety—by violence, his writing seems to suggest—is one of Sohrab Ahmari's professed goals. His infamous declaration of war against more libertarian and individualist strains of conservatism published at *First Things*, "Against David Frenchism," was prompted by seeing an advertisement for a public-library program in which drag performers read storybooks to children. If you think that using state violence to ban performers from reading to children while wearing amusing costumes and make-up seems ludicrous, you probably have a healthy sense of proportion and are unlikely to be given a job writing for certain sorts of magazines. As it happens, most people have this sense of proportion, which is why, in *The Unbroken Thread*, Ahmari couches his politics in the most abstract possible terms. This is most obvious in his chapter on the question "Does God need politics?" in which he addresses whether politics ought to be subordinate to religion. Using Aristotelian terms, he contends that a political community must be ordered toward the common good and that this necessarily means being ordered toward (some kind of) worship of God. Once again, he is silent about which kind of worship, adjudicated by whom—no doubt he imagines that this coy refusal to let slip the seventh veil is artful prudence. Unfortunately both for Ahmari and for readers, he turns out to be a cellophane Salome, and his secrets are on full display. It is obvious to any attentive reader that when Ahmari talks about ordering a state toward God, what he means is subordinating politics to the Catholic Church. And even by this, he does not mean letting the Pope set or veto policy—for all his faults, I have very little doubt that if Pope Francis were actually setting public policy, it would be an upheaval in the global economic order that even socialists can scarcely dream of. No, what he and his allies seem to pine for is a kind of fantasy Catholicism, a dreamlike amalgamation of the Holy Roman and Eastern Roman Empires in which all rulers bow to Rome, the Spanish Inquisition is fondly remembered, and nobody would dare suggest that abducting a secretly baptized Jewish child from his parents might be wrong. This is a dream of unchecked imperial might as a substitute for politics, of bypassing the work of democracy and the unruly world of actual human beings via blunt use of the police and the army.

The term for this that St. Augustine coined is *libido dominandi*, the lust for ruling. It's a deeply unpopular fault to admit to in a democratic culture, but this doesn't mean it has disappeared; we just have more innovative ways of disavowing it. One of our most effective tricks is to convince ourselves that we're simply holding firm to a principle: it is the principle, we say—the principle of piety, for example, or of party discipline—that everyone should honor. We abstract our desires and make little idols of them, because if we dress them in sufficiently regal and impersonal costumes, they will not look so much like us. Such tutelary spirits keep us comfortable, but idolatry is the first prohibition of the Decalogue for a reason: to fashion images and ideals for veneration is both to domesticate and tame the God who gives us our every breath and to reject the image of God already given to us in other people, to whom we owe all the care and attention that the most dazzling icon would command. Such attention and care for others is, in the end, the only possible ground on which tradition can be founded. Absent this human connection, realized in specific and regular acts of care that bind us to one another, tradition is one more lifeless idol set among the boundary-stones of conscience, a monster facing outward that warns any who might approach with hurt or need against the monstrosity within.

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# 'My Life's Detective'

BURKE NIXON

It's remarkable how little we actually know about other people's lives. We see our neighbors across the hall or across the street, smile and share pleasantries, but what do we know about what really goes on inside their homes or their minds? We can work or learn or worship alongside someone for years and never learn about that person's complex past or deepest passions. Everywhere we go, we're surrounded by people whose lives are hidden from us.

And, of course, we keep our own lives hidden, too. We don't go around sharing our fears and flaws. We don't publicize our most private conversations. We hide our insecurities and complicated backstories—which makes it all the more meaningful when we *do* share the details of our lives with someone else, or when someone shares those details with us. Such encounters can feel sacred.

Sherry Turkle's memoir, *The Empathy Diaries*, offers one of these rare, illuminating encounters. From the book's captivating first pages, Turkle seems determined to share the secret complications of her extraordinary life, from her mid-twentieth-century Brooklyn childhood to her early days as a professor at MIT. In previous books like *Reclaiming Conversation* and *Alone Together*, Turkle explored the impact of technology on our relationships and sense of self, but these books barely skimmed the surface of her own life and relationships. This memoir, however, refuses to remain on the surface. It's a powerfully honest work of autobiography, a vivid and unflinching examination of what we hide from others and what others hide from us.

"From a very young age," Turkle writes, "I saw myself as my life's detective." Living with her mother, aunt, and grandparents—a close-knit Jewish family dividing their time between Brooklyn's East Seventeenth Street and Rockaway—her childhood is both full of love and shadowed by secrets. No one speaks of her absent father. The surname she shares with him, Zimmerman, is taboo. Piecing together clues, she wrestles with unspoken questions that she won't be able to answer for many years: Why did her mother leave her father? Why won't her family speak of him? What did he *do*?

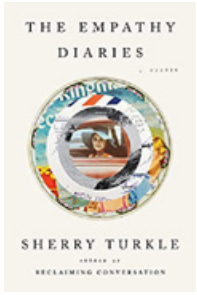
Meanwhile, the secret of her name intensifies. One evening, a "strange man" comes to dinner and Sherry learns that this man, Milton Turkle, will be her "new father." Her name will be Sherry Turkle now, except at school, where she'll remain Sherry Zimmerman, but she should never mention her real name outside of school. "You can't let anyone know about Sherry Zimmerman," her mother tells her.

Sherry does her best to keep the secret. When she slips up and uses her legal name at a Girl Scout meeting, her mother doesn't speak to her for a week. After her mother has children with Milton—a man who often unburdens his own secret insecurities to his young stepdaughter—Sherry has to hide her schoolwork in a "special locked cabinet" so that her siblings won't discover her real identity.

Throughout her mother's life, Turkle lives with the twin burdens of what her glamorous, intelligent, insecure mother hides from her and what she requires her to hide from others. "My mother kept secrets and spoke to me in a kind of code," she writes. "Nothing was straightforward. From childhood, I had to figure out how to read her mind, to intuit the contours of her reality. If I developed empathy, at first, it wasn't so much a way to find connection as a survival strategy."

Turkle's memoir explores how our families shape us and how we shape ourselves. From her earliest school days, Sherry is gifted and driven, determined to lift herself and her mother out of their modest circumstances. She dreams of attending Radcliffe, maybe even graduate school. But she's also deeply self-conscious, full of inherited insecurities, a constant outsider. Even as she succeeds in school, always finishing at the top of her class, she doubts herself: "I felt fraudulent, for all my hard work."

In high school, Turkle learns to speed-read so that she can devour the books she encounters while babysitting. She finds a role model in the "passionate, articulate" heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*: "Elizabeth Bennet was not where she should be. And she did not waste her time before she got




**THE EMPATHY DIARIES**
A Memoir

SHERRY TURKLE
Penguin Press
$28 | 384 pp.

Sherry Turkle

JUSTIN KANEPS

to that new place. She did not become vulgar when surrounded by coarseness. While waiting, she cultivated herself."

Turkle's own story of self-cultivation is a fascinating aspect of this memoir. She achieves her childhood dream, earning a scholarship to Radcliffe, but her insecurities only deepen there. She experiences the kind of minor humiliations that stick with a person for decades: a baffled and clueless response to a professor's question, a sexual joke she doesn't understand at a dance, a blind date she cancels at the last moment because of her footwear, a faux pas with a roommate's borrowed dress, a mortifying accusation of petty theft. "For years afterward," she writes, "I tried to find a way of being that would make me at ease in the world without blaming myself for what I didn't know along the way."

Turkle also faces the "sexist environment that every Radcliffe student had to navigate," where her celebrated Harvard professors are invariably male and where only undergraduate men can earn prizes or participate in experiments. At the same time, she encounters courses and teachers—Samuel Beer, Martin Peretz—that shape her intellectual and personal trajectory. Curious and ambitious, she becomes fascinated with how big ideas can shape reality and how reality can challenge or complicate big ideas.

She journeys from Radcliffe to Paris to graduate school at Harvard and the University of Chicago and eventually to MIT, but her non-academic experiences along the way stand out the most: working at Saks Fifth Avenue or cleaning the windows of a fancy apartment in Paris, taking a trip to Israel with twenty other Jewish students or speaking with young Germans about the Holocaust, receiving treasured and much-needed gifts (a typewriter, a rolling suitcase) from her grandmother and aunt, or introducing her proud grandfather to her dissertation advisor at her doctoral graduation.

Turkle never presents herself as the admirable and all-conquering hero of her own life story. Throughout the book, she holds herself and others up to a vivid, illuminating, and often unflattering scrutiny. And so we encounter her first husband, the celebrated mathematician and MIT professor Seymour Papert, in all his unique charisma, intelligence, and deep-seated shortcomings. In the early stages of their relationship, he teaches Turkle's grandfather to juggle; he also neglects to mention his ex-wives and teenage daughter. When he buys Turkle an engagement ring, he makes an additional purchase: a charm-bracelet for an ex-girlfriend. In the book's retelling, their marriage is thrilling, intellectually rewarding, and deeply problematic.

At MIT, Turkle comes to realize that Papert and other celebrated male intellectual figures thrive in an environment that excuses their most unreliable and insensitive behavior. These men "made a world where intellect was valued more highly than empathy, a good conversation more highly than common courtesy." To be interesting in this world, Turkle notes, one doesn't have to be kind; one simply has to be brilliant.

We witness some of her dismaying encounters with brilliant and interesting men. She's asked to host a dinner in her apartment for Apple II–era Steve Jobs, who stays just long enough to tell her the food she spent all day purchasing and preparing for him is the "wrong kind of vegetarian." She hosts a lunch at the Ritz for Jaques Lacan, who becomes irate when a waiter asks him to put on a tie and who later gives a baffling lecture about "elephant turds." At a cocktail party after the lecture, Octavio Paz approaches her only to comment, in French, on her breasts. Turkle depicts these moments only in passing, but they reflect her larger mission: to clearly examine the reality behind the curtain of public life.

Beginning with her traumatic early experiences with her biological father—whom Turkle learns about only as an adult—she often finds herself in the presence of men who prioritize their own needs, knowledge, and sense of achievement over the feelings of others. Her memoir suggests that everyone has their own complicated emotional lives, but not everyone can recognize *other people's* emotions. Some of the men in Turkle's life offer a nauseating demonstration of this fact: they appear eternally oblivious to the wounds they inflict. As much as empathy itself, Turkle explores this curious and devastating absence.

In the book's final sections, she draws on her research to explain this absence of empathy, reflecting on how technology and the scientific mindset can lead to "the kind of thinking that treats people as things." Echoing her previous books, she argues that we dehumanize others and ourselves when we begin to think of human lives as data and the mind as a machine. Such thinking, she suggests, trains the mind to avoid ambivalence and "think in absolutes."

At the end of such a nuanced and engrossing memoir, these conclusions feel a bit perfunctory. And they aren't quite convincing: Haven't humans been treating others like things since well before the invention of modern science and technology? The rest of Turkle's book, by contrast, tells a more timeless story, about family and identity, about cruelty and devotion and the eternal detective story of growing up. At its best, *The Empathy Diaries* is a deeply moving work of literature, revealing us to ourselves. The concluding sections, unfortunately, feel more like a TED Talk.

In her epilogue, Turkle suggests that the first step toward escaping the dehumanizing technological mindset is to "reclaim our complex selves." Imperfect but unforgettable, *The Empathy Diaries* does precisely that. Despite her mother's childhood warnings to keep her secrets hidden, Turkle demonstrates a courageous and vulnerable candor in these pages. Her book accomplishes what autobiography so rarely does, peeling back the polished surface and self-serving simplifications to reveal the rich life underneath. In doing so, she reminds us that everyone we meet carries around their own complications, and that it may be an act of empathy simply to recognize what we can't see.

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# Here to Stay

JAMES J. SHEEHAN

On May 9, 1950, Robert Schuman, the French Foreign Minister, delivered one of the twentieth century's most significant speeches. Its purpose was to propose that France and Germany, joined by other interested European states, should place their production and distribution of coal and steel under a "Higher Authority." Schuman's immediate goal was to integrate and thereby control a revitalized German economy. But Schuman also pointed to the eventual creation of an "organized and living Europe" that would provide the basis for a lasting peace. This Europe, he argued, "will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity." These modest phrases expressed a grand strategy of historical change resting on the conviction that the same gradual accumulation of individual actions that created and sustained market economies could also transform international relations. In a world governed by "de facto solidarity," individual states might continue to exist but they would lose the incentive—and eventually the ability—to fight one another. Like the economy, the international order would be shaped by productive and necessarily peaceful competition.


**EVER CLOSER UNION?**
Europe in the West
PERRY ANDERSON
Verso
$26.95 | 272 pp.

No one who listened to Schuman's brief remarks on that May afternoon could have imagined "the organized and living Europe" that now exists. In April 1951, six states (France, Italy, West Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands) signed a treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community; in 2022, the European Union has twenty-seven members and extends from Portugal to Poland, the Baltic to the Mediterranean. The ECSC's original institutions—a commission, parliament, and court—have grown enormously. The European Parliament, for example, has 705 members (directly elected since 1979), who are supported by a staff of seven thou-

MEPs in the European Parliament Hemicycle, France, 2018

ANDIA/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

*The European Parliament is a representative institution, but what it represents is a fragmented and largely inert political community that is unable to play an active role in decision-making, let alone bear the burden of sovereignty.*

sand functionaries. The EU's compilation of laws, rights, and regulations (the so-called *acquis communautaire*), which covers everything from the movement of goods and people to the placement of electrical outlets, fills 90,000 pages. As Perry Anderson points out in his book, *Ever Closer Union?*, the U.S. tax code, which is notorious for its arcane complexity, takes up a mere 6,500 pages.

Only three of the four essays in Anderson's book are about the European Union. In the first, a long and acute analysis of the work of Adam Tooze, an economic historian who teaches at Columbia, the EU makes no more than a brief appearance. The second essay is a respectful but highly critical account of the career of Luuk van Middelaar, whose 2013 book, *The Passage to Europe: How a Continent Became a Union*, is one of the most interesting books about European integration to appear in the past two decades. Anderson's own views on the EU are in "The Rivets of Unity," which is the essay that most readers will find especially helpful. The concluding chapter, "The Breakaway," considers Brexit; it is necessarily inconclusive because the course and consequences of Britain's departure from the EU are by no means settled.

The three chapters on the EU originally appeared in the *London Review of Books*. Like many of the essays in the *LRB*, they are erudite, vividly written, and have a tendency to wander away from the matter at hand. One might wonder, for instance, why Anderson concludes his account of van Middelaar with ten pages on Friedrich Gentz, a nineteenth-century conservative publicist. Gentz and van Middelar do have some things in common, but hardly enough to justify this extensive rehearsal of Gentz's life and thought. Here and elsewhere, both the author and his readers would have benefited from a firmer editorial hand.

Anderson takes a rather dim view of the EU. He dismisses (rather too readily, in my opinion) the European project's alleged accomplishments—international peace, human rights, social solidarity, and economic growth, all of which, he argues, are either overstated or the result of other developments. In the end, he acknowledges only two benefits from European integration: the free movement of people across borders within the Schengen zone (which overlaps but does not coincide with the EU) and the presence of some attractive goods on the shelves of members' supermarkets. These modest advantages, combined with the force of habit, may be enough to engender "listless assent" from Europeans, a commitment that falls far short of the exalted aspirations of Europe's advocates but may be enough for its survival.

Anderson's principle criticism of the EU is its essentially undemocratic character. As he correctly points out, the institutions that have the greatest impact on people's lives—the commission, court, and central bank—are set apart from the influence, or even the scrutiny, of a European public. The Council of the European Union (not to be confused with the European Council or the Council of Europe), which has become increasingly powerful in the past few years, is composed of ministers from the member states who meet in secret and make their decisions by consensus. The least significant element in this institutional array is the European Parliament, which is, in Anderson's acerbic summary, more like a "court musician" than a "tribune of the people."

Despite this cascade of criticisms, Anderson recognizes that there is every reason to believe the EU is here to stay. After the Brexit catastrophe, it is unlikely that any government will hold a referendum on its country's membership any time soon. Moreover, as Anderson correctly notes, leaving the EU was an option for Britain only because it did not belong to the European monetary union. For the nineteen countries (including Europe's most important economies) that use the euro, replacing it with national currencies would be extraordinarily difficult to accomplish and would have incalculable economic consequences.

To understand the EU it is important to recognize that it is unlike any other political organization: more than a confederation of sovereign states (like NATO or the UN), but not quite a federal state (like the United States or Germany). Since the 1950s, the economic cooperation of the EU's members has led them to accept restrictions on their sovereignty that would have been unimaginable before 1945. But the EU's member states, contrary to what some Europeans hoped, have not disappeared; indeed there are indications they have become stronger and more assertive. Moreover, it is in the member states that a political public continues to influence decision-making. The EU is not—and shows no signs of becoming—a democracy for the simple-yet-significant reason that there is no European demos. The European Parliament is indeed a representative institution, but what it represents is a fragmented and largely inert political community that is unable to play an active role in decision-making, let alone bear the burden of sovereignty.

As Schuman had predicted seventy years ago, Europe has developed without a plan. Its "de facto solidarity" is still very much a work in progress, responding to historical challenges and opportunities. But like so many of our contemporary political institutions, it is much easier to point out the EU's shortcomings than it is to show how—or why—it can be replaced.

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Pregnant women pray to Our Lady of Childbirth inside the cathedral in Valencia, Spain, May 19, 2020.

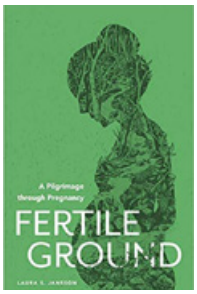
CNS PHOTO/NACHO DOCE, REUTERS

# Theology in Motion

CARRIE FREDERICK FROST

The pregnant body is indeed "theology in motion," as Laura S. Jansson writes in her book, *Fertile Ground: A Pilgrimage through Pregnancy*. She uses this phrase to describe her own experiences as a pregnant woman, but it is surely true in a grander sense for the Christian tradition: God came into the world not in the blink of an eye, but in and through his mother's womb—through the process of pregnancy, labor, and delivery. Just like the rest of us.

For a tradition that literally begins in the body of a mother, Christianity has dedicated remarkably little theological reflection to the experience of pregnancy. Fortunately, as the title of Jansson's book suggests, there's no dearth of material. Though marketed to expectant mothers—to whom it will be an especially valuable resource—Jansson's work is also a boon for anyone interested in thinking deeply about pregnancy, birth, the embodied experience of being human, and the deeply Christian mysteries of life and death.




**FERTILE GROUND**
A Pilgrimage through Pregnancy

LAURA S. JANSSON
Ancient Faith
$18.95 | 320 pp.

*Fertile Ground* is designed to follow the week-by-week progress of a pregnancy. I read it in one sitting, which I do not recommend. It was like eating a box of one's favorite truffles all at once. Much better to spread it out over the months of a pregnancy and savor each chapter one at a time. That being said, no one should be discouraged by the book's format. An expectant mother can acquire the book at any stage of her pregnancy, begin reading at the relevant week, and feel free to go back later and dip in and out of previous chapters.

*Christ tells us that just as a baby comes forth from his mother, joy is born from pain. Resurrection comes not just after death, but through it.*

Others might do well to simply read it more slowly than I did.

Jansson brings a unique combination of professional training and life experience to bear on this book. She has a masters' degree in theology and philosophy from Oxford University, and is an Orthodox Christian doula, a childbirth educator, and a mother. She has also lived in an unusual variety of settings, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Serbia, Germany, and Fiji. This background makes for a book that avoids the saccharine sentimentality that pervades much of Christian writing about motherhood, admirably balancing theological sophistication with accessibility and demonstrating an unusual level of cross-cultural sensitivity.

Jansson joins a growing number of women within the Orthodox Church who are thinking theologically about motherhood, and what she has to offer is significant. Take Chapter 14, titled "Links"—one of my favorite parts of the book. Starting with the way a pregnant woman's bellybutton changes during pregnancy, Jansson goes on to discuss, among other things, St. Symeon the New Theologian's advice for praying the Jesus Prayer with the *omphaloskepsis* (literally "navel-gazing") method, the physical connection of umbilical cord between mother and child, the genealogy of Christ, and, finally, the icon of the foremothers of Christ, in which Christ and three generations of his maternal ancestors are nestled, one inside the other.

It is still unusual, even now, to find Scripture quoted and interpreted in the context of pregnancy and giving birth. Jansson's elucidation of John 16:20–22 is fresh and illuminating. She explains that, at first, it seems that Christ is simply explaining to his disciples that "at His death they will experience an all-consuming grief, like the anguish of a laboring woman." Yet, as Jansson explains, Christ is also connecting the laboring women's birth experience with his own Resurrection: "Both Christ and the birthing mother bring forth new life, but through pain and sacrifice. Our species is perpetuated only on the brink of annihilation. It's striking that Christ chose to describe Himself using such an explicitly feminine metaphor." After a brief comparison of translation issues, Jansson concludes, "Christ tells us that just as a baby comes forth from his mother, joy is born from pain. Joy is blissful not despite the adversity, but because of it. Resurrection comes not just after death, but through it." She adds that this rings true for her own experience of labor, delivery, and the postpartum body. This sort of deep investigation of the biblical text with an eye for social and maternal themes reminds me of the fantastic work of Beverly Roberts Gaventa on the maternal imagery of Apostle Paul. It also makes me wish Jansson would extend her work beyond this guidebook. Because it has been structured and marketed as a book for pregnant women, it will likely remain largely confined to that readership, no matter how much one encourages others to read it.

I doubt Jansson intended her book to be radical or revolutionary, but it is at the very least strikingly original. For example, her use of "foremothers" to refer to women who have come before us within the tradition is technically correct and not exactly controversial. But within the context of Orthodox Christianity—in which "patriarchy" is a word with positive connotations (in the Orthodox Church "patriarchs" are the head bishops of synods) and the Church Fathers reign supreme (the next time someone drops the phrase "and the Church Mothers," see if they can name one)—"foremothers" *lands* in a certain way. No complaints from me. On the contrary, I feel that the book was weakest when Jansson shies away from acknowledging just how innovative her own project is, or from lamentable aspects of Orthodox praxis concerning pregnancy and motherhood. While her chapter on the Orthodox prayers used when a mother returns to church forty days after delivery does acknowledge that these prayers describe the new mother as "impure" or "defiled" by childbirth, Jansson seems more comfortable with finding ways for new mothers to deal with their reactions to this language than with placing the onus where it rightfully belongs: on the Orthodox Church itself. These theologically indefensible and pastorally harmful prayers should be overhauled as soon as possible. (Jansson does mention that one jurisdiction has begun to offer alternatives.)

But at many other points, Jansson is willing to examine sensitive matters. A whole section of the appendix is dedicated to miscarriage. Given the frequency of miscarriage and the fact that it often goes unmentioned in books about pregnancy and birth, this is an especially important feature of the book. Jansson also discusses, without undue *pudeur*, the visceral realities of pregnancy, making good use of her experience as a doula. Perineal tearing, lochia, labor pain, the changing postpartum body—all these things are addressed with real love and care, and with theological sensitivity. This is my favorite quality of Jansson's book: the way she has constructed it to accurately reflect the total experience of expecting another human being. She brings it all—intellect, soul, and body—together in *Fertile Ground* in a way that rightfully and beautifully honors the "theology in motion" that is pregnancy.

**CARRIE FREDERICK FROST** *is a professor of theology at Saint Sophia Ukrainian Orthodox Seminary, a mother of five, and a board member of St. Phoebe Center for the Deaconess.*

## HURAKAN DESPACITO

*David Skeel*

Gigantic engines revving and roaring
to life, again, again and again
until everything is lost.

Over and out, the island flattened.

Where Arawaks once watched the mountain
muscling hurricanes off to the right
or left, two massive gashes
appear on a cliff:
Irma and then Maria.

Yucca, malanga, and yautia grew
close to the ground. The rice
tended by slaves of another century
equally indestructible.

Irma, Maria, Maria.

Forget about color, the artist advises,
start out as a spacemaker
on a flat thing with four corners.

FEMA inspectors canvas the neighborhoods
all day, o.k., o.k., hole up in a hedge
fund manager's hotel at night.

Blue patches sprout on the missing roofs.

Swamped by reporters on a boulevard littered
with signs, the Governor blames
the Army Corps engineers for equipment
somewhere at sea, steers clear
of the mayor who hands bottled water
to student protestors and dances the Bomba
with Ricky Martin.

The great periplum
rotates past doctors and nurses
testing borrowed walkie talkies—64 dead
or is it 3,000?—past tech-pharma companies
decked out with diesel generators,
the only farms still cultivated since
King Sugar was deposed.

Back in El Yunque,
the workers clearing rainforest wreckage
from an upper road see clear
to the ocean over downed trees, to a bay
glowing with ancient messages.

Somebody claims to have found Maria's
dislocated breast in the museum
at Ponce: it is nursing baby
Jesus in a seventeenth century painting.

Over and out, o.k., o.k.

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**DAVID SKEEL** *is a law professor at the University of Pennsylvania and chairman of the Puerto Rico oversight board.*

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Lewis C. Daniel, *Mt. Marcy*, 1940

# Source & Summit

**GRIFFIN OLEYNICK**

At 5,344 feet, Mt. Marcy in New York's Adirondacks is no Everest or Denali. It's not even a Mt. Mitchell (North Carolina)—the highest mountain east of the Mississippi, at 6,684 feet—or a Mt. Washington (New Hampshire), which at 6,289 feet is the tallest peak in the northeast. But it easily tops anything that Vermont's Green Mountains have to offer, and it even bests Maine's remote Mt. Katahdin, which famously thwarted Henry David Thoreau's attempted ascent in 1846. ("It was vast, Titanic, and such as man never inhabits," he wrote afterward.)

Mt. Marcy is also the highest point in New York, and in the dead of winter a climb to its summit is far more challenging than an ordinary day hike. Getting to the top and back before sunset means setting out before dawn. The temperature is typically below zero, and winds frequently reach fifty miles an hour. The snowpack is so deep it might not melt until July. Make that journey alone, and the challenges are compounded. Who's there to help if frostbite or hypothermia sets in? Or to keep you from wandering off the trail, a pretty common occurrence in the Adirondacks?

In short, a solo winter hike up Mt. Marcy is a risky proposition. But I was feeling pretty confident as I cruised down the bumpy access road from Lake Placid and pulled into the lot at the historic (and oddly spelled) "Adirondack Loj" early one morning in January. I'd risen at 4:30 a.m.—an "Alpine start," as it's called—and it was still dark and bitterly cold (negative twenty-five degrees, according to my car's thermometer).

Prior winter hikes taught me that if I wanted to retain feeling in my fingers and toes, I needed to get moving quickly. I planned to ascend Mt. Marcy from the north via the Van Hoevenberg trail, with the goal of reaching the summit by noon. I'd then extend the trip a little by descending south, passing Lake Tear of the Clouds, the source of the Hudson River and the place where Theodore Roosevelt learned that William McKinley was close to death and that he'd soon be president. From there I'd follow the undulating course of the frozen Opalescent River before rounding the base of landslide-scarred Mt. Colden. At last I'd make my way past the wooden leantos near Marcy Dam, aiming to arrive back in the lot before sundown. I had just over seventeen miles and 4,000 vertical feet of hiking ahead. I strapped on my snowshoes, poles, and pack, signed in at the register, and set off.

The first few miles of the trail meandered through eastern hardwoods, mostly beeches and maples, their leaves long since gone. The pitch here was gentle, affording me a literal warm-up as I crunched briskly under the moon and stars. Only my eyes were exposed; even so, tears froze instantly along my eyelashes. I tried snapping a few pictures with my iPhone before it switched itself off, defeated by the cold.

The ascent proper begins around mile four. Unlike modern hiking trails, often made easier by switchbacks and traverses, most Adirondack pathways—originally blazed in the 1800s by loggers and surveyors—tend to shoot straight up, seeking the quickest possible route to the top. The Phelps trail, where I'd now arrived, began rising through a thick forest of conifers.

Soon enough the sun was out in full force. I'd already been at it for a few hours, but was ready to work hard, too. Up and up I climbed, breathing harder and kicking into snow and ice for traction with every step. Paradoxically, the danger lies not in falling but in overheating. If your clothes are too warm, you'll start to sweat. Once you're wet, it's nearly impossible to get dry again, which increases the risk of hypothermia. This means you're constantly monitoring your temperature, adding and shedding layers while also trying to balance your fluid and calorie intake.

All this leaves little time to stop and admire the scenery, which grew more dramatic the higher I climbed. As I emerged from sunlit corridors of pines, I saw enormous icicles clinging to gray rock like fangs (two nearby peaks are appropriately named the Wolf Jaws). Deep pillows of powder lay atop a clearing above a frozen waterfall, with Algonquin Peak, New York's second tallest, looming in the distance. Closer to the summit, the *krummholz*—gnarled dwarf pines shaped by the winds—were frosted with feathery rime ice. Passing through them was like swimming in an open-air coral reef, against the backdrop of a deep blue sky.

Suddenly, there was a noise behind me: two college kids appeared out of nowhere and nearly blew me off the trail. I was startled—I hadn't expected to see anyone else up here—but I calmed down when I finally stepped out onto the final pitch, a bald, rocky dome of ice and snow. The college kids, following a line of cairns a few hundred feet above me, now looked like tiny astronauts walking across a silent lunar landscape, their black silhouettes throwing the massive sweep of the Adirondacks into relief. Newly goggled, mittened, and gripping my orange ice ax, I began making my way slowly and carefully to the top.

It didn't take long to reach the summit. The two college kids were still there. They congratulated me with a fist-bump before heading back down, leaving me alone atop an ocean of endless peaks. By that point it was nearly noon. The temperature had climbed to five degrees above zero. I lingered for about twenty minutes, trying to identify the mountains and lakes surrounding me.

Geologically, the Adirondacks are part of the Canadian Shield, not the Appalachians. Compared to other mountains in the Northeast, they're younger, still rising by about two millimeters each year. They're also less weathered by erosion, which gives them a more jagged, "Alpine" silhouette than their counterparts in neighboring Vermont, whose tallest peaks, Mt. Mansfield and the Camel's Hump, I saw rising high across Lake Champlain.

Historically, the Adirondacks are rich in anecdote and color. Roosevelt, who had a lifelong passion for the Adirondacks, hiked up Mt. Marcy seventy-four years after its first recorded ascent, which was completed by a team led by Williams College geologist Ebeneezer Emmons in 1837. (Roosevelt's midnight journey on the eve of McKinley's death, from the mountain to the closest train station at North Creek, is now memorialized as the Marcy-Roosevelt trail.) Down in the valley, near the town of North Elba, I could see flat farmland that once belonged to the abolitionist John Brown; he was buried there in 1859 after being executed for his ill-fated raid on the federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. (Russell Banks's 1998 historical novel about Brown was titled *Cloudsplitter*, the English word for *Tahawus*, an Algonquin term sometimes used for Mt. Marcy.) Farther away was the village of Saranac Lake, where New York City physician Edward Livingston Trudeau developed a successful treatment for tuberculosis and opened a sanitorium in the 1880s. (The novelist Robert Louis Stevenson was one of his first patients.) Finally, off in Lake Placid, I could make out the steep double ramps of the Olympic Ski Jumping Complex, built for the 1980 Winter Games where the U.S. men's hockey team performed their "Miracle on Ice," beating the Soviet Union during the height of the Cold War.

But what I really wanted to see was humble Lake Tear of the Clouds, so I pressed on. An hour later I arrived at its single-acre surface, shaped like a droplet and caked in snow. It's hard to believe that this tiny and aptly named pond (technically a glacial tarn) eventually swells into the mighty Hudson River, which 280 miles south at Haverstraw Bay in the Tappan Zee measures three miles across, its widest point. If I had placed a bottle here in the snow, after the spring thaw it might travel downriver past Saratoga and Albany, Poughkeepsie and West Point, Tarrytown and Yonkers before beaching up, in a little less than a year, near my apartment in Manhattan.

Time to get moving: it was late afternoon, and my legs and back were growing weary, my water bottles getting low, my food supplies dwindling. I was fatigued yet fueled by a desire to preserve mental images of everything I'd just seen. A final surge of energy carried me on through Marcy Dam, landing me back at my car at 4:00 p.m.—an hour to spare before sundown.

It had been a long, hard day. I unbuckled my pack, slipped out of my snowshoes, and started my car. I set the heat on full blast—the hike was over, but the cold had begun to bite again. A satellite text to friends and family let them know I'd safely completed the longest, most challenging hike I'd ever attempted. I moved over to the tailgate of my car, sat down, and pulled off my boots. No blisters, but my legs were stiff and sore, and a bottle of Gatorade I'd forgotten to insulate was frozen solid. Not a bad trade-off for an epic hike.

And then, two days later, I was back in New York City. Looking through the windows of the *Commonweal* office above Riverside Drive I could see the Hudson, not as wide here as at Tappan Zee, but many miles farther from its source up north. Barges, tankers, and police boats plied the nearby channels, while Marcy's summit and that tiny tear-shaped lake were visible only in my mind. I wasn't able to take the wilderness back home—as it should be. But maybe it was here anyway. Mixed in the churning waters of the river I could imagine some of last year's melted snow from Mt. Marcy, having patiently journeyed like that floating bottle I'd thought of on my hike. I wasn't able to see it, exactly. But I knew where it had come from.

**GRIFFIN OLEYNICK** *is an assistant editor at* Commonweal.

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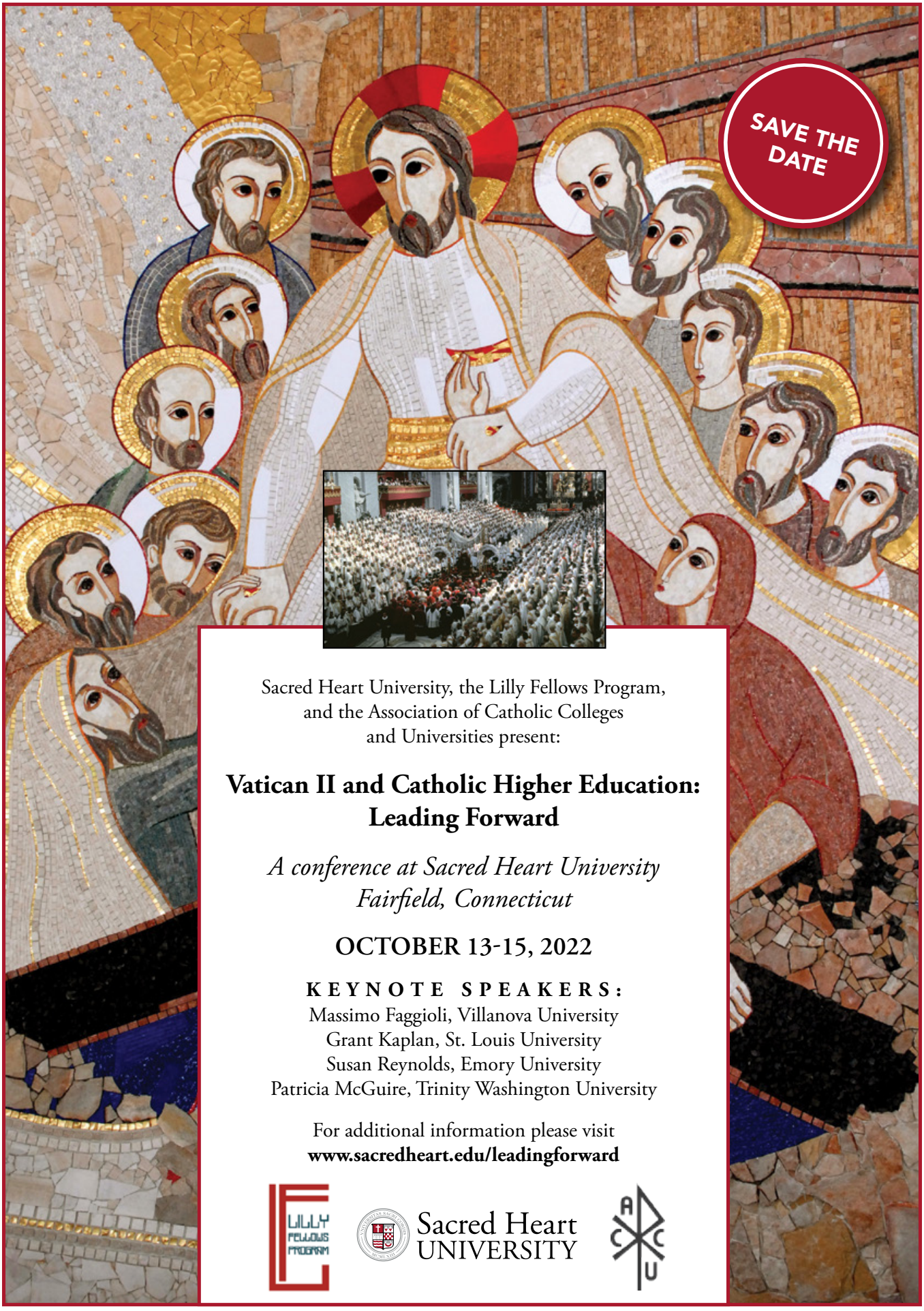


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