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LETTERS

Lebanon, penance, secularization and the sacred

A SIMPLISTIC NON-SOLUTION

Zeead Yaghi's article ("The Toll of Sectarian Politics," February) promotes the thesis that the devastating problems that beset Lebanon—devalued currency, a broken economy, political dysfunction—all find their source in its sectarian underpinnings. Since its foundation, Lebanon has functioned according to an arrangement that recognizes eighteen sects, i.e. five Islamic sects (Sunni, Shia, Druze, Alawite, and Ismaili); the Maronites and eleven other Christian sects; and the Jewish community. Political power is allocated in consideration of affiliation with these sects.

The author rightly places blame on the corruption of political officials who have functioned more in consideration of their personal or clan interests than the good of the Lebanese people. The problems of Lebanon might be resolvable—if their source stopped there.

No mention is made of the flood of immigrants in Lebanon. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency reports that over 479,000 refugees are in Lebanon. About 45 percent of them live in the country's twelve refugee camps. The most recent war in Syria forced over 1.5 million refugees to flee to Lebanon. This immigration burden has been placed on the 4.7 million Lebanese citizens residing in the country.

The Covid pandemic afflicted Lebanon like it did the rest of the world. The other crises crippled Lebanon in its efforts to protect and serve its people.

Nor does the author note that superpowers and Lebanon's neighbors in the Middle East have used Lebanon as their sandbox to carry out proxy politics and wars for decades.

The author seems to feel that the leadership of the Maronite Church can solve the problems, observing that it is one of the largest landowners in Lebanon. He fails to consider that the disposition of the property is not simply in the hands of the Maronite patriarch, just as the property of the Catholic Church in the United States could not be disposed of by the pope. (Be sure that if the Maronite Church did begin to sell its property, there are ready Sunni and Shiite buyers.)

Abandonment of a sectarian arrangement is a simplistic go-to solution for Western observers who are comfortable with secular governments. However, to ignore religious affiliation in Lebanon would be as difficult as ignoring race in the United States. The West might be comfortable viewing all Lebanese simply as Lebanese, but be sure that Saudi Arabia and Iran will view Lebanon as a nation of Sunni and Shia adherents, with a small, insignificant Christian minority.

Chorbishop John D. Faris
Saint Anthony Maronite Catholic Church
Glen Allen, Va.

THE COMMON MORTAL SINS

In his recent article ("How the Irish Changed Penance," February), John Rodden explains that in the early Church notorious sins like murder, apostasy, and adultery were forgiven through the Order of Penitents, a rigorous and extended time of public penance and mortification. He also explains that what we call venial sins were forgiven by participating in the Eucharist, giving alms, and seeking forgiveness from those whom they had offended. But he does not deal directly with forgiveness of the other, more common transgressions that we are accustomed to call mortal (grave) sins. These would include such shortcomings as serious theft, harmful slander, vicious racism, and numerous sexual sins.

Years ago William J. Bausch explained in his book *A New Look at the Sacraments* how Christians who committed these other mortal (grave) but not notorious sins were forgiven. He states that concerning the Church in those early ages, "There is no suggestion that all we call grave sin excluded them from the Eucharist and required the use of the sacrament of penance.... This reference to grave sins may surprise us, but the indications are that those in what we call mortal sins approached the Eucharist for forgiveness."

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LETTERS

If Bausch is correct and if the Christians of those first centuries could receive forgiveness of grave sin by participating in the Eucharist for all but the most notorious sins, could not the same be our understanding and practice today? I would hope so.

James Doll
Columbus, N.C.

STILL ENCHANTED

I was quite impressed with James Kloppenberg's brilliant summary of the important work of Hans Joas ("Signs of the Sacred," February). For most of my academic teaching career, and now during my retirement years, I have consistently questioned the view that secularization will eventually obliterate any meaningful sense of the sacred. Yes, institutional religion is certainly on the decline, especially in Europe and America, but deeper down, in people of all persuasions, a sense of the more, the transcendent, the holy, and the sacred continues to exist. This becomes more evident when we follow the trail blazed by social philosophers and theologians who called for a shift of analytic focus from institutions as objects of study to the experiential life subjects, both in the center and on the fringes of formal religious involvement. I have found the theological and spiritual writings of Martin Buber, Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Rahner, and others particularly helpful, especially as they pointed to the deep experience of mutual love as a primary locus of the sacred.

David M. Thomas
Kalispell, Mont.

PURSUIT OF UNITY

I'd like to offer a word of appreciation for Gregory Hillis's article ("Unity Without Reduction," March). I am very grateful for the balanced view he provides. I have a range of emotions when it comes to traditionalists: from respect to fear to repulsion to appreciation, depending on the context of my interaction with them. But no matter the circumstances of a given moment, I continue to recognize that God is present and active in them. They are my Catholic brothers and sisters, and for my part I am determined to continue dialogue and the pursuit of unity with them. My understanding of Ignatian spirituality supports me in this. I'm relieved to know I am not alone.

Ann M. Cortez
Los Angeles, Calif.

CLASSIFIED

Russia's War Crimes

On April 18, President Vladimir Putin honored members of the Russian army's 64th Motorized Brigade by elevating them to the "esteemed" status of "guards." His decree recognized the brigade's "mass heroism and bravery, steadfastness and fortitude…for the protection of the Fatherland and state interests." Putin did not mention that members of the 64th Brigade committed atrocities in the Kyiv suburb of Bucha, from which they retreated in April. Left behind were the bodies of hundreds of innocent civilians, buried in mass graves or lying in the streets, many of them dismembered, some bearing signs of torture and rape.

The world has been shocked by the extent and degree of Russia's brutality. Western leaders, including President Biden, have vigorously condemned the atrocities, and demanded that Russia be held accountable for them. But their words carry little weight in Russia. The latest developments in Ukraine give every indication that Putin and his generals are carrying on with a coordinated strategy—previously implemented in Chechnya and Syria—to brutalize civilians. As the "Battle for Donbas" intensifies in eastern Ukraine, the world will likely see more evidence of this shameless barbarity: residential neighborhoods, hospitals, and train stations bombed; ceasefires disregarded; evacuation corridors blocked. An independent fact-finding report issued by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe found "clear patterns of international humanitarian law violations by the Russian forces in their conduct of hostilities."

While the immediate imperatives are to keep Russia from destroying Ukraine and to end the war as soon as possible, securing justice for the victims of Russian war crimes will be an urgent task in the years to come. Every Russian involved in launching this unprovoked war of aggression or carrying out atrocities in places like Bucha, Mariupol, and Lviv should be brought to justice. But where? Ukraine and a post-Putin Russia could both claim jurisdiction, but neither can be reasonably expected to hold fair and impartial trials. President Volodymyr Zelensky has called on the United Nations to create a new Nuremberg-style international tribunal, but that seems both unlikely and unnecessary. Unlikely because doing so would require a two-thirds vote by the U.N. General Assembly and somehow overriding a Russian veto in the Security Council, unnecessary because an appropriate venue for trying war crimes already exists: the International Criminal Court (ICC), headquartered in The Hague.

The ICC is not perfect. Since its creation in 1998 it has indicted mainly the former leaders of African countries, including Liberia's Charles Taylor and Chad's Hissène Habré. And even many African war criminals, including former Sudanese dictator Omar al-Bashir, have managed to elude it. There is good reason, then, to suppose that most of Russia's war criminals, including Putin himself, would have to be tried *in absentia*. Complicating matters still further is the fact that neither Ukraine nor Russia is party to the ICC. Nor is the United States. For more than twenty years, five separate U.S. administrations have opposed the ICC on the grounds that it could end up trying American citizens for war crimes, a task no non-American institution could be entrusted with. Between 1999 and 2002 Congress even passed legislation restricting the U.S. government's ability to provide assistance to the ICC. The cost of such hypocritical American exceptionalism is now obvious: how can the United States demand that Putin be brought to justice in a court it refuses to recognize?

It's unlikely that the United States will heed the calls from some members of Congress to join the ICC immediately. But former senator Christopher J. Dodd and John B. Bellinger III have argued in the *Washington Post* that the United States could—and should—assist with proceedings in The Hague without becoming a party to the ICC or violating the American Service-Members' Protection Act. Such assistance, they explain, could come in the form of funding, intelligence gathering and sharing, prosecutorial guidance, as well as law-enforcement and diplomatic personnel. U.S. aid to the ICC would help strengthen the legitimacy of the ICC and reverse two decades of erosion of international criminal law. Happily, broad political support for the ICC now exists on both sides of the aisle. Meanwhile, Senators Lindsey Graham (R–S.C.) and Dick Durbin (D–Ill.) are working to fast-track legislation that would bolster U.S. acceptance of the legal concept of universal jurisdiction.

It's true that without a regime change in Russia, Putin and his enablers will probably never face punishment, at home or abroad. But that should not prevent the ICC from trying them for their crimes. An official conviction, based on an impartial weighing of the evidence, would at least prevent the Putin regime from rehabilitating itself in the international community. If found guilty, he and those who helped him with his war would be treated as pariahs by all who value human rights and international law. An ICC conviction would make it clear that such treatment was not the product of "Russophobia" but of universal principles applied without fear or favor. God willing, Putin will one day also have to answer to the Russian people for his many abuses of power. But even if that day never comes, he must learn that he is not above judgment.

—April 21, 2022

A Ceasefire in Yemen

On April 2, a small ray of hope emerged from Yemen: a sixty-day ceasefire brokered by the United Nations, beginning on the first day of Ramadan. It is the first real ceasefire in the six-year war between Yemen's coalition government and Houthi rebels, which has become a proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Since the ceasefire took effect, Yemen has been allowed to receive much-needed fuel shipments, and there have been some flights to and from Sana'a's airport, but the Saudi blockade of Yemen's ports continues. The peace remains fragile and limited.

Nearly four hundred thousand Yemenis have died in the conflict, 60 percent of them from hunger, illness, or unsafe drinking water, and many have been unable to access basic necessities because of the Saudi blockade. More than 23 million people, amounting to three-quarters of the country's population, are in need of aid. Meanwhile, the price of grain is climbing because of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Too many Americans remain unaware of our own country's role in creating this humanitarian catastrophe. The United States supplies a significant amount of the aircraft Saudi Arabia uses in Yemen. Over a year ago, President Joe Biden vowed to reduce American involvement in the war, announcing that the United States would end "offensive operations" in Yemen and halt "relevant" arms sales to Saudi Arabia. At the time, observers were skeptical. Saudi Arabia claims it has acted entirely defensively in Yemen, so the United States has continued providing military aid and intelligence to the Saudis without violating Biden's vague promise.

Nevertheless, there has been a notable strain in U.S.-Saudi relations. The House of Saud does not appear comfortable with Biden administration officials, preferring the uncritical solicitude of the Trump family. Donald Trump was eager to provide Saudi Arabia with weapons for its war in Yemen, and used the U.S. military to attack Riyadh's enemies, like Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. Biden, by contrast, has expressed openness to reducing American aid for Saudi Arabia, and supports restoring the so-called Iran nuclear deal. After Russia invaded Ukraine, the Saudis turned down U.S. requests to increase crude-oil production to lower gasoline prices for Americans. The Saudi government will not even condemn the invasion.

In mid-April, the *Intercept* reported that Congressional Democrats drafted a letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken encouraging the Biden administration to "rebalance" its relationship with Saudi Arabia. "A recalibration of the U.S.-Saudi partnership is long overdue in order to reflect President Biden's important commitment to uphold human rights and democratic values in our foreign policy," the letter reads, citing the war in Yemen, the murder of *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and Saudi Arabia's refusal to increase crude-oil production as reasons to distance ourselves from the regime.

It is long past time for the United States to stop protecting the Saudi regime and enabling its atrocities in Yemen. But that is not enough. As we rush relief to Ukrainians fleeing violence, we should also remember those suffering the effects of war in other parts of the world, and acknowledge our own responsibility for some of that suffering. The richest country in the world has a moral duty to make sure that children do not starve in Yemen and Afghanistan because the West is preoccupied with events in Eastern Europe. As the war in Ukraine worsened, the World Food Programme pleaded with donor countries: "Don't make us take food from children that are hungry to give to children that are starving."

—Regina Munch

The GOP Ditches Debates

It came as little surprise in April when Ronna McDaniel, Chairman of the Republican National Committee, withdrew her party from the Commission on Presidential Debates. She'd been making noise about it for a while, having issued an explicit warning in a January letter to the CPD, the nonpartisan organization that has handled every presidential debate since 1988. Republicans have long complained about what they see as the commission's bias toward Democratic candidates. Now Republican candidates for the 2024 nomination will have to sign a pledge that they won't debate the Democratic nominee in events coordinated by the CPD. A fixture of American politics for decades, for better and worse, may now be a thing of the past.

McDaniel, the niece of former Republican presidential nominee and current Utah Senator Mitt Romney, has been working overtime to separate herself and the RNC from the ever-shrinking establishment wing of the GOP that her uncle personifies. Earlier this year she led the drive to censure Republican Representatives Liz Cheney of Wyoming and Adam Kinzinger of Illinois for joining the House committee investigating the January 6 insurrection, charging them with "persecution of ordinary citizens engaged in legitimate political discourse." That earned her a scolding not only from Romney but from several other Senate Republicans, including South Carolina's Lindsey Graham. But this "backlash" (as it was characterized at the time) quickly subsided. Many think that McDaniel is currying favor with Donald Trump in preparation for

a political campaign of her own, likely in Michigan, where her uncle's father, George Romney, was once governor. Certainly her efforts as RNC chair seem to reflect the wishes and impulses of the former president, smoothing the way for him to run again in 2024. A campaign without debates would likely benefit Trump, who fares poorly in substantive one-on-ones, where his ignorance of policy is hard to conceal. Then again, any GOP candidate would likely have trouble debating policies because the Republican Party is now refusing to commit itself to an agenda. Sen. Mitch McConnell has made a point of staying silent about plans if the Republicans regain a Senate majority in this fall's midterms. As Paul Krugman recently noted, today's GOP doesn't do issues, nor does it even fight a "real" culture war. Rather, it's all about "riling up the base against phantasms [and] threats that don't exist," like critical race theory and Democratic pedophiles.

From the GOP's perspective, this obviates the need for presidential debates, which provide a forum for discussing real policy differences and allow the electorate to assess the temperaments and qualifications of candidates for the country's highest office. Would debates really be missed? It's true that most voters have made their choice by the time candidates take to the podium, and social and alternative media have so reinforced political silos that an evening of semi-civil exchange is unlikely to change anyone's mind. But another question might be how to make presidential debates better—after all, Democrats have complained about them too, and they are important for that small but potentially significant sliver of undecided voters. Debate organizers could tame the carnivalesque atmosphere that tends to prevail by getting rid of live audiences and enforcing rules of conduct for both moderators (no gotcha questions, hold participants to their allotted time) and participants (stick to your allotted time, don't interrupt, no stalking your opponent around the stage). But such improvements are predicated on basic assumptions about how American democracy should work in the first place. What seems beyond debate is that at least some Republicans no longer share those assumptions.

—Dominic Preziosi

Living with Alzheimer's

Not long ago we moved back to a shoreline village where we had lived happily for many years. We have reunited with many old friends and neighbors, who, somewhat to our astonishment, are still in residence. Admittedly, we are all getting (much) older, but most of us are managing reasonably well. However, one of our closest friends from that earlier time, who had a distinguished career as a lawyer and judge, is now struggling with Alzheimer's.

He is out walking around the village nearly every day, and sometimes I join him. He is tall and thin, and walks at a pace I can't quite manage because of a bum knee. Our conversations are usually pretty one-sided. He understands what I say to him, and he gets my jokes, but he usually can't retrieve the words he wants to use in response. "You know I have Alzheimer's?" he has asked me on several different occasions. I once asked how he was diagnosed. He said he had experienced some disturbing symptoms and went for tests. The tests were conclusive. "That was a bad day," he told me. He is on a battery of medicines and a strict diet, and his wife is a stalwart support. His daughter lives nearby and he is still very much connected to his church. He seems well anchored in his community, but he doesn't pretend the disease is anything other than bewildering. I am humbled by his bravery and by his family's determination to care for him.

I thought of my friend after reading reviews of a new book by the novelist and psychotherapist Amy Bloom. The book is titled *In Love: A Memoir of Love and Loss*. It is about her husband's decision to end his life at age sixty-six after he received an Alzheimer's diagnosis. The reviews I've seen have been very positive, even reverential. None questions her husband's "right to die" or her acquiescence in that wish. Any such reservations are clearly understood to be out of bounds. In fact, much is made of the difficulties and injustices facing Americans seeking assisted suicide. Bloom and her husband had to go to Switzerland to end his life. Although his death was not imminent, her husband was adamant that he did not want to suffer the indignities associated with Alzheimer's. "I'd rather die on my feet than live on my knees," he told his wife.

Naturally, most of us are loath to question such private decisions. But a life "on one's knees" is not necessarily a humiliation; it can offer a different and humanizing perspective. The bioethicist and moral theologian Gilbert Meilaender once wrote an essay with the mischievous title "I Want to Burden My Loved Ones." Meilaender offered a note of caution about what the sick and dying may think they want when it comes to being cared for. In our desire not to become a burden, we deprive our loved ones of something essential. "Is it not in large measure what it means to belong to a family: to burden each other—and to find, almost miraculously, that others are willing, even happy, to carry such burdens?" he wrote.

In caring for the dying, our culture often insists that we ask what those who are comatose or afflicted with dementia would want us to do. Meilaender argued that that is the wrong question. Better to ask, "What can we do to benefit the life he still has?" This is the question our friend's family seem to have asked themselves. I wish the reviewers of Bloom's book had asked it too.

—Paul Baumann

RITA FERRONE

'At Least Take the Bodies'

Russia's refusal to repatriate its unburied dead underscores the inhumanity of the Putin regime.

It was February 27, the fourth day of Russia's war against Ukraine, and the Sunday of the Last Judgment in the Orthodox calendar. Epiphanius, Metropolitan of Kyiv and all Ukraine, published an open letter to Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia. In it, Epiphanius scorns Kirill for political opportunism and cold-hearted abandonment of those Ukrainian citizens who belong to the Moscow Patriarchate: "Unfortunately, it has become clear from your previous public statements that maintaining the goodwill of Putin and the Russian Federation is much more important to you than caring for the people of Ukraine, some of whom considered you their shepherd before the war. Therefore it hardly makes sense to ask you to do something effective to stop Russia's aggression against Ukraine immediately." He went on to say, "If you cannot raise your voice against aggression, at least take the bodies of Russian soldiers whose lives have become the price for the ideas of the 'Russian world,' yours and your president's."

Was the reference to the unburied Russian soldiers merely a taunt? Apparently not. At that time, Ukraine was reporting that more than five thousand Russians had died in the first days of combat. The Ukrainians worked with the International Red Cross to repatriate the bodies, but the Russians were not cooperating. Ukraine even set up a website through which families could locate their dead, but it was immediately blocked in Russia.

Vladimir Putin's political interests are served by keeping the body count a secret and suppressing evidence of Russian losses. A stream of corpses returning to the villages and towns of the Russian Federation would falsify his preferred narrative of a swift and successful "special military operation." As the number of casualties continues to mount, so does the pressure to conceal them. Statistics on this question are impossible to verify, but on March 24 NATO estimated that between seven thousand and fifteen thousand Russian soldiers had died in Ukraine, whereas Russia's defense ministry has admitted to only 1,351 deaths.

What could possibly override this politically motivated silence? Nothing so far has succeeded in doing so, yet it is worth noting that Epiphanius's challenge to Kirill ("at least take the bodies") draws force from a religio-cultural context that transcends the present regime. Respect for the dead is deeply ingrained in Eastern Orthodoxy. Cremation is forbidden and even embalming is frowned upon. An Orthodox funeral is an elaborate affair, involving home customs as well as church and graveside ceremonies. Other religious groups in the region (such as Muslims, Jews, and Western Christians) are likewise deeply concerned about giving the dead proper burial. Photographs of Orthodox funerals in Ukraine attest to the immense care taken in laying a body to rest—the abundance of flowers, even in wartime; the candles and vestments; the loaves of bread set atop the coffins; the processions and weeping—all underscore the importance of this *transitus*. Even nonbelievers in Russia hold secular "farewell ceremonies." To abandon the dead is unthinkable. "Look, even when a cat or a dog dies, you don't do that," Ukrainian President Zelensky said in an interview with Russian journalists. "This is war. But it's not cattle!"

Many in the West have hoped that as the bodies of the dead return to Russia, bereaved families will rise up against the war in Ukraine and public sentiment will turn against Putin. The Soldiers Mothers' Committee helped to end the

Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in just this way, as the dead speak a truth that won't be silenced. No one, it is confidently assumed, could suppress the evidence of such losses forever.

As Lev Shlosberg, a Russian human rights advocate and deputy of the regional administration of Pskov, explained in a February article in *La Nuova Europa*, however, it is more than possible for Russia to do just that. He learned this the hard way in 2014, when he took up the case of thirteen soldiers stationed in Pskov whose deaths were linked to operations in the Donbas region of Ukraine. Their bodies were ultimately returned to the Pskov region, but their families received no information concerning the causes or place

The body of a Russian soldier in Trostyanets, Ukraine, March 28, 2022

AP PHOTO/FELIPE DANA

of their deaths. In response to Shlosberg's complaint, authorities clarified that information concerning soldiers' deaths is a state secret. In 2015, Putin's Supreme Court made it official: death due to any military operation, not only in war but also in "special operations," falls under the rubric of secrecy. When the Russian military uses mobile crematoria to dispose of the remains of fallen soldiers, their families will not be told where they died or where the ashes are scattered. Shlosberg wrote further that "I do not exclude that the relatives of the fallen will be required to sign (an absolutely illegal request, but they will do it) a commitment not to make public the news of the death of the relative 'in the interests of the Russian Federation.'" The dead are simply erased.

The unburied bodies of Russian soldiers have become a leitmotif of the war in Ukraine. It is a horror acknowledged on both sides—by Ukrainians scandalized that Russians have resisted efforts to repatriate their dead, and by grieving families in the Russian Federation who await the return of the bodies with tears and frustration. They are the subject of woeful commentary by observers distressed by the specter of the mobile crematoria and the "erasure" of the Russian dead for propaganda purposes, and by pundits in the West who (so far, vainly) hope that an influx of corpses will turn the tide of public perception in Russia.

What do these unburied bodies represent? They have certainly become a sign and symbol of the inhumanity of the Russian regime as a whole. As Zelensky observed, "It's scary because when you have such an attitude towards your own people, what kind of attitude [do you have] towards everyone else?" Yet the abandonment of the dead also raises an important challenge to our own society, in which the denial of death and suppression of traditional customs regarding death have long been on the rise. Can we really say we respect life, if we fail to treat the dead with respect?

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

Pope Francis arrives for an audience with members of the Roman Curia in the Apostolic Palace at the Vatican, December 23, 2021.

AUSTEN IVEREIGH

Rome on Mission

Pope Francis reforms the Curia

Many of us who are interested in reform of the Church's central governing body have been misled: we were told that the new constitution for the Roman Curia would contain few surprises. We knew it was called *Praedicate evangelium* ("Preach the Gospel"), and that its unifying idea, taken from *Evangelii gaudium*, was making the Church suitable for the evangelization of today's (secular) world rather than for its self-preservation in a vanished Christendom. We knew that Vatican bodies would no longer be divided into sheep and goats—lofty "congregations" with juridical clout and lowly "councils" producing unread reports—but would be level-pegged as "dicasteries," from the Greek *dikastērion,* meaning law-court. We knew other things too: that women and lay people would rank high in some of the dicasteries, that the dicasteries would merge existing departments, and that the whole operation would be slimmed down. So what would be truly new in the ecclesial governance of the Eternal City? After all, the structural makeover has been in process on an experimental basis since 2015, visible to the naked eye. *Praedicate*, we assumed, would merely render *de jure* what was already *de facto.*

This turned out not to be true, but you wouldn't have guessed this from the way the Vatican released *Praedicate*, dampening the drumrolls. The first new constitution of the Roman curia in more than thirty years landed in inboxes on a Saturday, without the usual notice, devoid of commentary, and only in Italian. The press conference two days later also seemed designed to keep corks in bottles: three Italian clerics read from a twenty-three-page commentary, which included a painstaking account of the way *Praedicate* had been drafted and redrafted over a period of nine years, in forty meetings of the pope's council of cardinal advisors, then sent to cardinals and curia heads and on to every bishop's conference, until it was finally ready in June 2020—only to be further niggled over by the soon-to-be-renamed Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith and the Council for Legislative Texts. One thing was clear: the fifth apostolic constitution on the Roman curia in the Church's history—after those of Sixtus V in 1588, Pius X in 1908, Paul VI in 1967, and John Paul II in 1988—is the fruit of an exhausting level of consultation, according to the ancient principle that "what affects all should be discussed by all." *Praedicate* is built to last well into the next generation.

So what *was* new? The main news headline was that any baptized person can now head any dicastery, "depending on their competence, power of governance, and function," as the fifth of the *Principles and Criteria* puts it. As this was reported ("Pope to allow…"), it

CNS PHOTO/VATICAN MEDIA

was not, in fact, news: the Dicastery for Communication has been headed by a layman, Paolo Ruffini, for years, and a half-dozen women (mostly women religious and members of movements) have long occupied important posts in the Curia—women such as Francesca di Giovanna, entrusted with the Holy See's relations with the United Nations and other multilateral bodies. Yet there *was* something new here, something momentous, in the justification for that principle: "any of the faithful" can in principle head a dicastery because authority in the Curia is exercised vicariously, on the pope's behalf, with power delegated directly from him.

Now it is true that John Paul II's constitution also made clear that the Curia's power is exercised vicariously, through power received from the pope. But *Pastor bonus* assumed that this power was delegated only to cardinals and bishops, because, well, since 1588 that had been the case. In the press conference to launch *Praedicate*, however, the Jesuit canonist Fr. Gianfranco Ghirlanda showed that the assumption should, if anything, be the opposite. If the power is the same (vicarious, delegated by the pope) whether exercised by a bishop, priest, religious, or layperson, then it settles a longstanding ecclesiological *disputatio*—namely, whether the power of governance is conferred by the sacrament of Orders. If it were, then lay people could not receive any office in the Church which involves the exercise of this power.

The Second Vatican Council did not want to settle the question and it was left open in the revised 1983 *Code of Canon Law*. But now, according to Ghirlanda, whose work has been on this very topic, *Praedicate* "confirms that the power of governance in the Church does not come from the sacrament of Orders, but from the canonical mission." Hear that? Rome has spoken; the matter is settled. The fact that Ghirlanda was asked officially to present the constitution can only mean that this broader implication is what the pope intends, and it is law. Never has clericalism been dealt such a deadly, final blow.

In this and so many other ways, the understated presentation of *Praedicate* was at odds with its import, as the pope, who hates triumphalism, doubtless intended. For *Praedicate* distills into law the essence of the Francis reform, showing not just what the Roman Curia is for, but what the *Church* is for—and what shape and culture both must have if they are credibly to perform the Gospel they preach in the third millennium.

This, at last, is the reform "strongly wished for by most of the cardinals gathered in the pre-conclave general congregations" in 2013, as *Praedicate* recalls at the end of its preamble. The date of the congregation's release—March 19, the ninth anniversary of Pope Francis's inaugural Mass—is a reminder of those days, when cardinals in the wake of Benedict's resignation stood up, one after another, to urge the next pope to turn a dysfunctional, inward-looking court of self-aggrandizing cronies into an effective, outward-looking organism of service to the whole Church. They wanted the Roman Curia, which had spent much of 2011 and 2012 deep in scandal, to be an inspiration and model, not an embarrassment; to facilitate rather than block relations between bishops and pope; to be a help in evangelizing, rather than a counter-witness.

Anyone who heard those pleas would see at once how *Praedicate* specifically addresses them. While St. John Paul II's constitution, *Pastor bonus*, was called simply "Apostolic Constitution on the Roman Curia," Francis's *Praedicate evangelium* is called "Apostolic Constitution on the Roman Curia and its service to the Church in the world." The most common complaint—after finances, which occupied the early years of Francis's reform—had been that the Curia was a law unto itself, self-referential and haughty, wedging itself between the local Church and the papacy. The Curia famously treated bishops with contempt, as they found on their *ad limina* visits to Rome (so called because every few years a country's bishops pay an official visit *ad limina apostolorum*, "to the threshold of the apostles," touring the dicasteries and meeting the pope.) Many bishops say the attitude was encouraged by St. John Paul II's 1988 *Apostolos suos*, which all but denied any standing to bishops' conferences.

That has long since changed. Bishops are now amazed by their reception in Rome under Francis: curial officials are keen to hear and learn from them, and to assist them. In its preamble, *Praedicate* praises the key role of bishops' conferences and regional collegial bodies, calls for a "healthy decentralization"—that is, autonomy regulated by the principle of communion—and says clearly that the Curia "does not place itself between the Pope and the bishops, but is at the full service of both." Reflecting the hierarchical nature of the Church, which is both primatial and collegial (the bishops govern "with and under Peter"), the service of the Curia is organically tied to the bishops, as the pope is; and its remit is to build bonds of collegial governance and communion by acting as a nerve center for creative ideas and contacts between bishops' conferences. Six articles of *Praedicate* (38–43) are dedicated to the *ad limina* visits, placing great importance on them, and stressing the role of the Curia in facilitating them.

Another complaint at those cardinals' meetings in February and March 2013 was about the Vatican's working culture: curial officials drawn from a narrow Italian pool too often turned out to be incompetent yet self-important obstructionists, prone to nepotism if not actual corruption, spiritually dried-out careerists and clericalists detached in every sense from the People of God. Expressing on paper years of Francis's reforms, *Praedicate*'s second chapter says that *curiali* should be distinguished by their spiritual life, pastoral experience, sobriety of life, and love of the poor, as well as their competence and capacity for discernment, and that they should serve in a spirit of collaboration and co-responsibility.

They may be selected from among bishops, clergy, religious, and lay people alike. What matters is not their state in life, but their spirit of service and mission. They should be from different cultures to reflect the Church's catholicity, and return to their dioceses or religious congregations after five years, which can be extended to a maximum of ten. According to their state of life, those who work in the Curia must attend to "the health of souls" in addition to their office tasks, be committed to regular personal and communal prayer, and carry out their work "with the joyful awareness of missionary disciples at the service of the entire People of God." Indeed, the function of the Roman Curia is not, primarily, bureaucratic-administrative but pastoral: as Article 3 of the General Norms puts it, the Curia carries out "a pastoral service in support of the mission of the Roman Pontiff and the bishops in their respective responsibilities to the universal Church."

There are many other important changes in *Praedicate*. The Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, for example, now falls within the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, resolving an enervating identity crisis in which some commissioners tried to turn it into a vehicle for holding the pope accountable to victim groups. That meant it was kept at arm's length by the Curia, weakening it. Now it will have real heft along with a degree of autonomy. On finances, there is now a healthy distance between the bodies that administer finances and those that hold them accountable—and sophisticated oversight mechanisms to detect wrongdoing.

Finally, the whole operation has been streamlined to prevent bloating and duplication. In addition to the Secretariat of State, four justice and six finance "bodies," and three offices to run the pope's household and liturgies, *Praedicate* reduces John Paul II's twenty-one congregations and councils to sixteen juridically equal dicasteries with clearly distinct responsibilities, helping to prevent turf wars and allowing for greater "inter-dicasterial" collaboration and co-responsibility.

But the real punch of *Praedicate*—its evangelizing power—is in its vision of the Church, drawn from *Evangelii gaudium* and the Acts of the Apostles. The preamble reminds us that Christ's mandate to preach the Gospel is the Church's primary task, and that it does so by witnessing to the mercy it has received through acts and words of humble service: touching the suffering flesh of Christ in the poor and the sick. To enable this witness, the Church is called to a missionary conversion, to which the reform of the Roman Curia contributes by harmonizing the daily work of the Vatican with that broader call to evangelize that Francis believes God is now making to the Church.

Hence the new ranking of the dicasteries. Where St. John Paul II put the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith first, Francis puts the Dicastery for Evangelization first, with himself at its head. The faith dicastery comes second, followed by the new Dicastery for the Service of Charity, because the Gospel is preached in both words and actions. The other dicasteries follow in no particular order: for the Oriental Churches; for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments; for the Causes of Saints; for Bishops; for the Clergy; for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life; for Laity, Family, and Life; for the Promotion of Christian Unity; for Interreligious Dialogue; for Culture and Education; for the Service of Integral Human Development for Legislative Texts; and for Communication.

The new thing here is a discreet but definite theological and ecclesiological shift. *Pastor bonus* focused almost every paragraph of its introduction on the Curia assisting the pope in his task of preserving the unity of faith and discipline. Communion in St. John Paul II's constitution is identical with unity, described as "a precious treasure to be preserved, defended, protected and promoted." This is the primary ministry, the *telos*, of the Supreme Pontiff, and therefore of the Curia. In *Praedicate*, by contrast, communion is not the object of the Curia's efforts but rather the life made possible by Christ's self-donation, to which the Curia witnesses by its internal culture. Communion "gives to the Church the face of synodality: a Church, that is, of mutual listening, in which everyone has something to learn: the faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: each listening to the other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit…to hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches."

The difference matters. The Curia is not an instrument of power by which the pope unifies the Church through his efforts, but a witness to the communion of the life of the Church made possible by the Holy Spirit. It is a shift from confidence in human power to receptivity to the Spirit, away from a command-and-control vertical Church to one where authority is service. It is a synodal Church of mutual listening and reciprocity in which all participate, whatever their state of life, under the guidance of the Spirit, after the model of the early Church. Francis is explicit about this model: the purpose of the renewal of the Church, and therefore of the Roman Curia, is to "enable the community of believers to come as close as possible to the experience of missionary communion lived by the Apostles with the Lord while He was on earth, and, following Pentecost, in the first community of Jerusalem under the effect of the Holy Spirit."

A synodal Roman Curia, marked by reciprocity and participation, fired by the Spirit for mission, dedicated to service, modeled on Acts? Wouldn't that take a miracle? That thought may have occurred to Pope Francis, for the new constitution goes into effect on June 5, the Solemnity of Pentecost. Perhaps on that date we can allow ourselves to uncork some bottles and at last let the drums roll.

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DANIEL K. FINN

Why India Needs Fewer Farmers

How economic growth changes agriculture

Reducing poverty is frustratingly difficult. The good news is that there is broad agreement on the goal of such efforts: that ordinary families should be able to support themselves by gainful, meaningful work. The bad news is that there is little agreement about which policies are most likely to achieve this goal, and the confidence with which various anti-poverty policies are proposed often seems to have more to do with ideology than with evidence.

Once, when I was in La Paz to give some lectures, I had a long conversation with the distinguished chair of the department of economics at the Catholic University of Bolivia. He told me that, under different political parties, his nation had tried every conceivable policy for economic development, and none of them had lifted Bolivia's poor out of poverty. International forces were part of the problem—he was no neoliberal—but the primary problem was just that poverty is so difficult to overcome.

A big part of that problem for poor nations around the globe is rural poverty and the fate of small farmers. The most recent struggle over agriculture to make the news came from India, where tens of thousands of farmers gathered in Delhi to protest against recent policy changes enacted by the ruling BJP party and its prime minister, Narendra Modi.

Three laws passed in September 2020 allowed farmers to sell their rice and wheat outside the current government-regulated wholesale markets, where farmers are guaranteed a minimum price. The farmers feared this was only the first step of an effort to end government-funded minimum prices for these grains and to open the way for fewer, larger farms. Following more than a year of protests in the streets of Delhi and elsewhere, Modi capitulated in November 2021. Emboldened by the victory, many Indian farmers are now calling for price supports for all farm products.

Commonweal correspondent Jo McGowan's latest dispatch from India ("Modi Backs Down," January 1, 2022) celebrates the political victory of the farmers; but, like her previous article on the protests ("Why the Farmers Are Angry," February 23, 2021), it seems to be based on the assumption that India can sustain its current number of farmers while providing them all with a better life in the long term. But no nation on earth has been able to do this, for one simple reason.

McGowan herself notes that agriculture made up 60 percent of India's total production (GDP) in 1960 but makes up only 15 percent today, while 50 percent of the population still depends on agriculture for its livelihood. But *why* has agriculture's share of GDP dropped so precipitously in the past half century? McGowan blames it on neoliberal globalization and the policies of India's current government. Neoliberalism is guilty of a host of terrible problems around the planet, but this isn't one of them.

Chart 1 illustrates the relationship between a nation's prosperity and the proportion of GDP generated by agriculture. As nations grow wealthier—and as poor nations grow less poor—farming produces a smaller and smaller share of their GDP. Chart 2 shows the same general picture, this time identifying the proportion of farmers in a nation's total workforce. Seven nations are represented, but every nation on earth has seen this long-term steady change in employment. Although agricultural workers make up less than 3 percent of the total workforce in the wealthiest nations, they represent over 50 percent of all workers in the poorest nations. That used to be true everywhere before the Industrial Revolution.

In this transition, farmers, or more frequently their adult children, are often lured away by better prospects elsewhere. (Non-farm incomes in India are about double those of farm incomes.) And even those who continue to farm start earning wages off the farm. According to India's National Statistical Office, between 2012 and 2019 the average income of farm households from crop cultivation barely kept up with inflation, but the farmers' *overall* inflation-adjusted income, including wages from other jobs, rose by 50 percent. And even with some outside income, many are forced to leave farming in desperation after personal financial collapse.

What accounts for this transformation? It's surely hard to blame the policies of the Indian government for three centuries of change in agriculture around the world. And those who want to blame neoliberalism will have to stretch that term to include eighteenth-century England and nineteenth-century France.

A better explanation is based on the economist's notion of the income elasticity of demand for food. As incomes rise, people spend more on most things they buy, but not the same *percentage* more on each thing. People spend a little more on food than before but a lot more on other things. Consider what a family would do if their income rose by 10 percent next year. Desperately poor families around the world might spend all that increased income on food. But above a certain level of economic security, a 10 percent rise in income leads families on average to spend only between 4 and 6 percent more on food. Even most poor families spend less than 10 percent extra on food and increase their spending on other things by more than 10 percent—saving for a small refrigerator, say, or "paying" for their daughter to stay in school by forgoing the income she could otherwise earn.

While the share of total household expenditures going to food falls, within those expenditures on food the share that goes to the farmer also falls. As incomes rise, people spend a growing share of their food budget on the processing of food (e.g., purchasing bread instead of buying the ingredients and baking it at home) or on prepared meals (whether at restaurants, grocery stores, or on the street). The fundamental forces at work here are not ideology but the choices of ordinary families. If the number of people working in agriculture remains constant while these changes occur, farmers will have to divide up a smaller and smaller share of their nation's wealth. The incomes of farm families will rise a bit, but much more slowly than the incomes of their fellow citizens in the cities. And that gap will increase over time.

This is what has been happening in India. Some may say that most Indian farmers would be content with what they once had and only wish to regain the minimum of security they previously enjoyed. But that's already impossible; and their current position will slowly, inevitably, become more precarious over time.

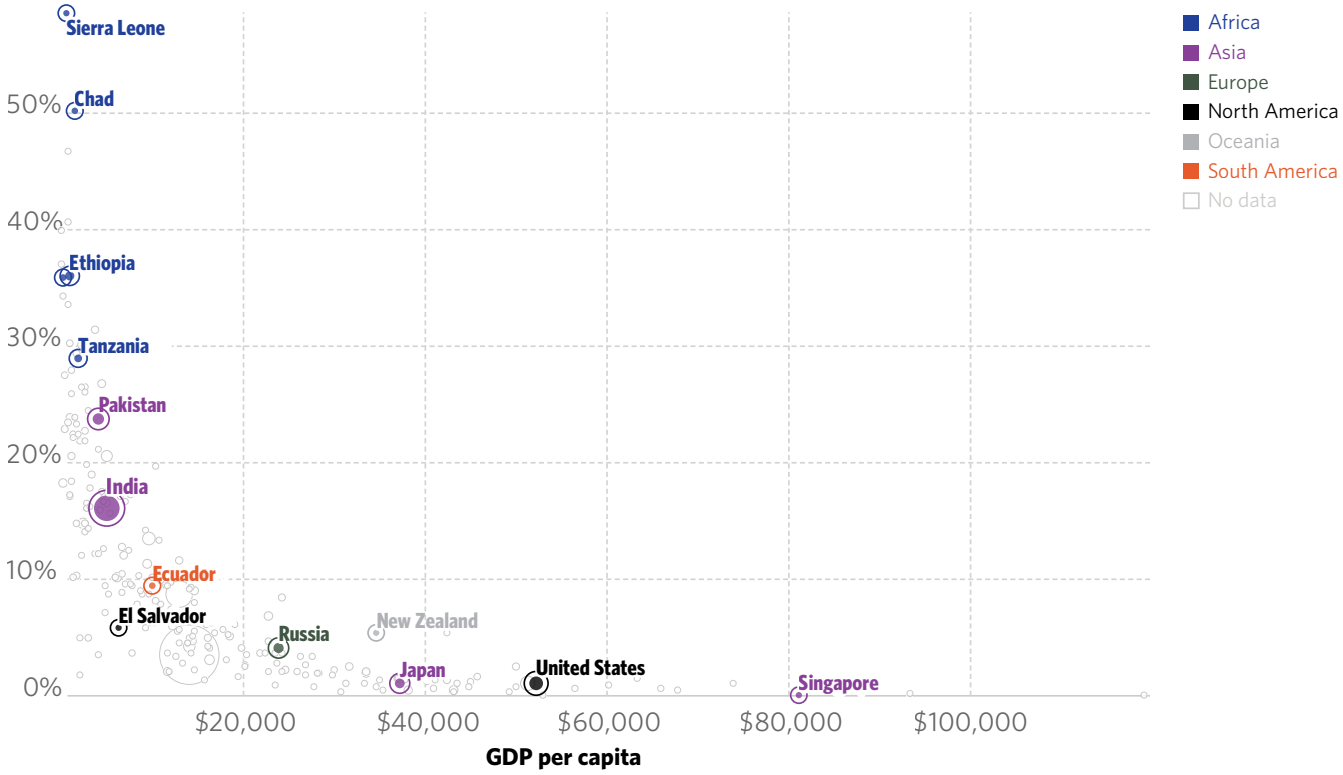
It is immensely difficult for a nation to responsibly assist in the shift of workers from traditional agriculture to other, better-compensated occupations. Political corruption and partisanship make it even more difficult. But if the long-term economic dynamics are misunderstood, there is even less hope for moving in the right direction, toward a just and sustainable society. The problem every poor nation must face is how to help reduce the number of people working on farms so that the farmers who remain can earn a decent living.

And, yes, the requirements of a "decent" life do change as a poor nation becomes less poor. Farmers today may value putting their children to work at a young age to help the family, but will their adult children not want more education (and other of life's conveniences) for their own teenagers?

Few nations have the options available to the Chinese government, which late last year "persuaded" Alibaba, the Chinese equivalent of Amazon, to spend more than $15 billion to address poverty and reduce income inequality in the company's home province, south of Shanghai. The main problem, of course, is the transition out of rural poverty, and Alibaba will be investing in ten projects to create jobs, provide services to vulnerable groups, and make technological innovations more widely available. China can strong-arm firms and violate human rights where democ-

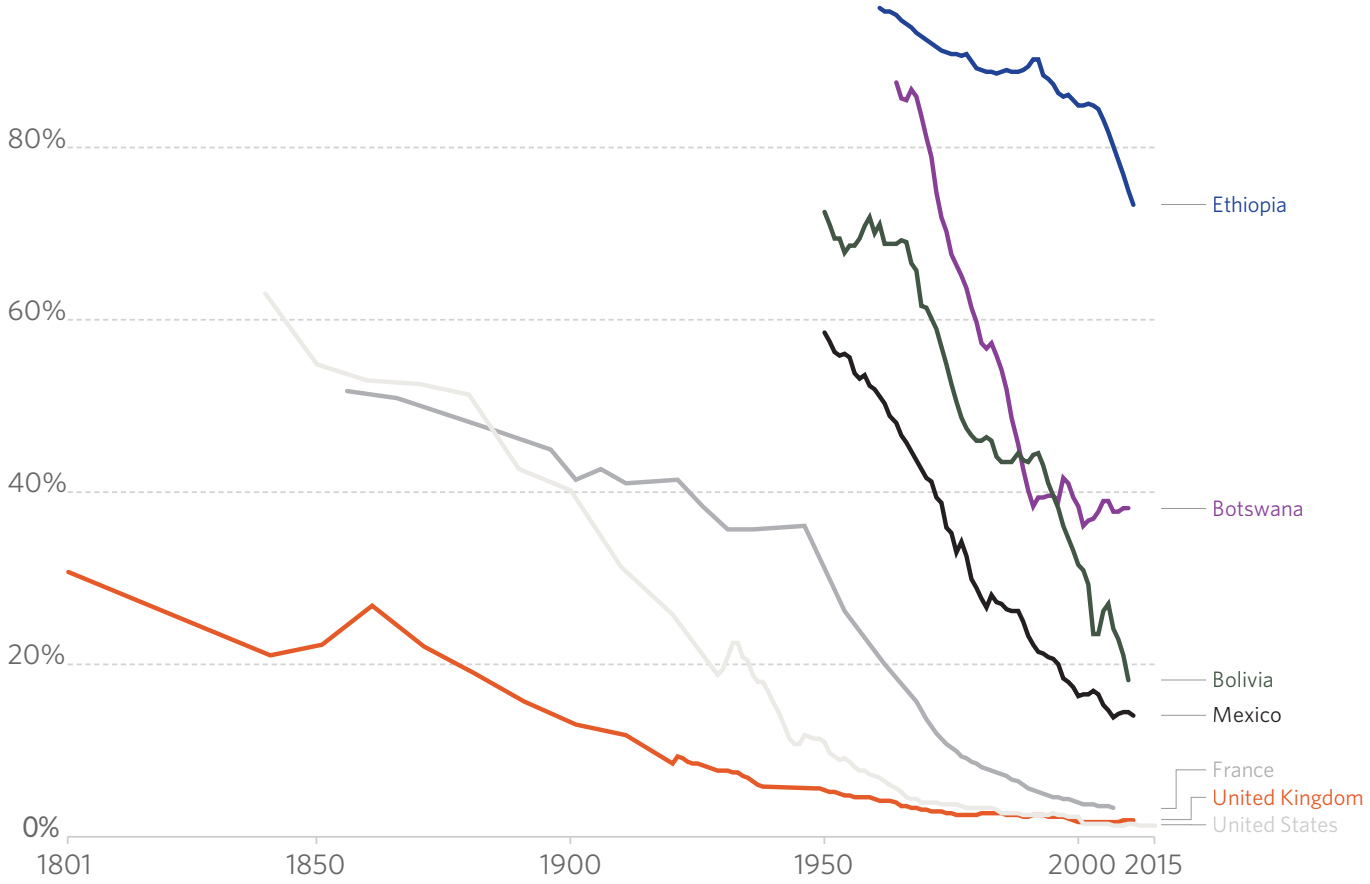
Share of agriculture in GDP vs GDP per capita, 2015

Agriculture includes the cultivation of crops and livestock production, as well as forestry, hunting and fishing.
Value added is the net output of the sector after adding up all outputs and subtracting intermediate inputs.



Source: World Bank, Population (Gapminder, HYDE(2016) & UN (2019)), Our World In Data
OurWorldInData.org/employment-in-agriculture

Share of agriculture in total employment, 1801 to 2015



Source: Our World In Data based on Herrendorf et al. (2014) and GGDC-10 (2015)

racies cannot, but it's clear that the Chinese government understands that an end to rural poverty will not come by supporting a constant population of agricultural workers.

Some say that political stability requires governments to allow farmers to continue as in the past. It is perfectly understandable why farmers in India do not want to leave farming, and India's democratically elected government needs political support from a large percentage of farmers to stay in power. But democracy in India will not be sustainable if a constant 50 percent of the population continues to be dependent on agriculture's ever-shrinking share of the nation's wealth. Today's 15 percent of GDP will become 10 percent, and, eventually, only 5 percent. Political instability is inevitable if the percentage of the population working on farms remains constant.

This is not an endorsement of neoliberalism. A moral economic-policy structure will not defer to every market pressure. Many "market forces" do not deserve the deference that neoliberalism recommends. And there is much that governments can and must do to reduce the back-breaking poverty of so many. But the most fundamental forces causing these ongoing changes in agriculture are the same in every nation on the planet, and they are irreversible. I am not defending the particular policies the Modi government tried to implement. (That would require a different conversation.) And I agree with McGowan that co-operatives and better agricultural science can help Indian farmers today. But no nation has been able to do what she seems to hope India can: maintain a large, stable proportion of agricultural workers and simultaneously ensure their long-term economic well-being.

Some economic goals that are morally attractive are also impossible. Recognizing this does not require that we resign ourselves either to the status quo or to uncontrolled workings of blind market forces, but it does prevent us from looking for hope in the wrong direction.

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A Whip of Cords

Phil Klay

How Christians have used the story of Christ and the money changers as a justification for violence

The whip is held high in Christ's hand, and a man in a loose yellow robe braces for the blow. Other merchants cower or scramble to gather their possessions. Their bodies are contorted, their clothes bright, their faces full of fear. Nearby, Pharisees debate the coming violence, but Christ himself looks calm, serene, without a trace of anger in his face. We don't see the blow land. And so we must imagine exactly how hard he strikes, since the moment El Greco depicts in *Purification of the Temple* is itself bloodless. No bruises, no scars, no bleeding flesh. We picture the righteous rage that lifted the whip, not the aftermath.

As a young man standing before this painting in the Frick Museum during the winter of 2006, I found it comforting. I was on leave visiting family, about to head to Iraq with the Marine Corps. I imagined that this painting, and the story from the gospels behind it, allowed my decision to serve in the military to sit comfortably with my faith. Here was Christ, "turn the other cheek," "blessed are the peacemakers" Christ, doing violence.

El Greco, *Purification of the Temple*, circa 1600

INCAMERASTOCK/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

It seemed to open the door to other kinds of violence. And though my particular job in the Marine Corps would likely be a safe, nonviolent one, the same could not be said for the enterprise to which I'd be contributing. Justification was required, both for the specific enterprise and for the thrill and fascination it held for me.

Violence was something I'd always enjoyed. The aestheticized violence of action movies, of course, but also the controlled violence of sport. I was a boxer and a rugby player. Those sports offered me ample opportunity to give and receive both pain and (usually) minor injury. Once, on a rugby tour in Canada, we engaged in a scrum with the opposing team and managed to push the Canadians back with enough force that they started backpedaling until one of the opposing players got caught in an odd position. We pressed forward; he began screaming in pain. We delightedly pushed harder. Fun. And boxing, of course, delivered such visceral satisfactions much more regularly (alongside humiliations, like the only fight my now-wife ever attended, about which you can guess the outcome).

The violence in Iraq was considerably more serious, the stakes higher, hence my desire for an image of righteous violence untroubled by horror. The text itself, though, from John 2, doesn't have much horror. It is a rather restrained depiction of supposed violence.

> The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me."

The passage doesn't describe a single blow. We never see the injured, need not imagine a man living with the scars from Christ's whip. There is no aftermath.

I went to Iraq and, because I was a Public Affairs Officer, doing my mostly safe job in a mostly safe part of a very dan-

gerous place, that aftermath was my only experience of violence—the injured civilians (civilians always suffer the most in wars) alongside Marines and enemy combatants treated by my unit's surgical platoon. There is no thrill in seeing such things. The horribly injured body of your enemy looks like any other human body, their pain no more pleasant to observe.

Our unit also contained the Mortuary Affairs unit, Marines whose job was to prepare the bodies of the dead to be sent home, a task that involves carefully preparing not simply the body (or body parts), but also the personal effects, the things that a Marine brought with him to war and that often spoke in a soft voice of his specific humanity outside of the uniform—whether it was through a sonogram kept in a pocket, or a prodigious stack of porn kept in a trunk. Someone in Mortuary Affairs told my sergeant a story of a Marine whose Humvee had caught fire after an IED strike. This Marine had made it outside the vehicle only to die in flames on the side of the road, and when his body came in, his two fists were tightly clutched around something, they didn't know what.

The Mortuary Affairs Marine went to work, carefully prying the burned fingers back, trying not to snap them off. What was the dead man holding? What, in his last hour, was the thing he clutched onto? A cross, perhaps? A good luck charm sent by a loved one? No, it was just some rocks. The Marine, in flames, had fallen to the desert and clutched in agony at whatever he could, clutched so hard that the points of the rocks that had been lying there were embedded in his flesh. They were a testament to nothing more than human agony.

For the great Church Father Origen, the story doesn't add up. First off, he's pretty sure that if Jesus tried to drive out a group of merchants with a whip, he probably would have been the one getting whupped. "And who that received a blow from the scourge of small cords…would not have attacked him and raised a cry and avenged himself with his own hand, especially when there was such a multitude present who might all feel themselves insulted by Jesus in the same way?"

But there's a bigger problem. "To think, moreover, of the Son of God taking the small cords in his hands and plaiting a scourge out of them for this driving out from the temple," Origen says, "does it not bespeak audacity and temerity and even some measure of lawlessness?" Jesus was

Rembrandt van Rijn, *Christ Driving the Money Changers from the Temple*, 1635

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART/GIFT OF FELIX M. WARBURG AND HIS FAMILY, 1941

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


Rembrandt. f. 163 5

no brawler. To fully imagine this scene means imagining a Christ at odds with the one we repeatedly encounter in the rest of the gospels.

Origen's solution is to turn the whole thing into an allegory. The temple is "the soul skilled in reason," the whip is Jesus' "word plaited out of doctrines of demonstration and rebuke," the ox is "earthly things," the poor sheep are "senseless and brutal things" (what did sheep ever do to Origen?), and the doves are "empty and unstable thoughts." If this interpretation seems dubious, well…tough. If it isn't allegory, then "we must say that the passage would otherwise have an unlikely air."

There's something very appealing about this mode of Biblical analysis—if you don't like a story in the gospels, just decide it means something totally different. As a child, I heard a priest (later arrested for embezzling parish funds to feed a gambling addiction) deliver a sermon in which he claimed that when Jesus said, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God," he was referring not to an actual needle. That would make the passage far too radical. Instead, he claimed, it referred to a gate in Jerusalem called "the Eye of a Needle," which, while small and narrow and difficult, could nevertheless allow a camel to shove his way through. Jeff Bezos's afterlife, then, need not be a freefall into hellfire but something more like crossing the crowded floor of a dancehall: awkward but doable. The theological term for this style of biblical interpretation is *bullshit*. Christ being, after all, pretty radical, most people who call themselves Christian, myself included, couldn't look ourselves in the mirror without it.

That's why it's not so surprising that before Christianity came to power (after Constantine saw the words "under this sign you will conquer" written in the sky, announcing the marriage of the Church and state violence), many of the Church Fathers were more uncompromising. "The whole world is wet with mutual blood; and murder," says Cyprian of Carthage, "which in the case of an individual is admitted to be a crime, is called a virtue when it is committed wholesale." "The catechumen or faithful who wants to become a soldier is to be rejected, for he has despised God," says Hippolytus. "We who formerly used to murder one another do not only now refrain from making war upon our enemies," writes Justin Martyr, "but also, that we may not lie nor deceive our examiners, willingly die confessing Christ." "Shall it be held lawful to make an occupation of the sword, when the Lord proclaims that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword?" Tertullian asks, before declaring, "A state of faith admits no plea of necessity."

But the Church Fathers were not quite pacifists, as is sometimes claimed. Tertullian, for example, still prays for "security to the empire" and "for brave armies"—he'd just prefer the fighting be done by pagans. Or, as Origen put it in the second century, "While others go out to war, we, as priests and servants of God, take part in the campaign in that we keep our hands clean and pray for the just cause." In this regard, they're like some of our modern elites. The richest 20 percent of zip codes in America are heavily underrepresented in the mostly middle-class military, and I've been asked more times than I can count, "Why would you join the military after Dartmouth? You had options!" If the fighting must be done, let it be done by lesser people.

As the pagan world faded, though, Christians increasingly had to do the fighting themselves. And bloody hands, Christians worried, could mean spiritual death. "Whenever you March out, O worldly warrior," wrote Bernard of Clairvaux, "you have to worry that killing your foe's body may mean killing your soul, or that by him you may be killed, body and soul both." As Philip G. Porter recently pointed out in these pages, early medieval Penitentials often imposed penances on soldiers who killed in war, regardless of whether the cause was just ("War & Penance," January). "Homicide in war is not reckoned by our Fathers as homicide," noted St. Basil the Great, one of the doctors of the Church, "Perhaps, however, it is well to counsel that those whose hands are not clean only abstain from Communion for three years." Pope Gregory VII argued "it is impossible to engage in military service without sin," though he also argued that "knights undergoing penance could nevertheless fight to defend justice on the advice of their bishops." You can fight and kill, but as Philo Judaeus pointed out, those you kill share "a supreme and common relationship to a common father." This is not the triumphant violence of American popular culture, but a more tragic vision, in which doing what needs to be done doesn't always leave us untarnished.

So perhaps Christ, the untarnished one, didn't do any violence at all. Scholars like Andy Alexis-Baker and N. Clayton Croy follow a tradition dating back to the sixth century, when Cosmas Indicopleustes argued that, if one pays close attention to the text of John's Gospel, it does not actually say that Christ struck people.

> He struck the brute beasts only, as it is written: "And having made a whip of cords he expelled all from the temple, both the sheep and the cattle." That is to say: He struck these as living but irrational creatures…. But the rational beings he neither struck nor pushed away, but chastised with speech, as it is written: "And to those who sold doves he said, 'Take these things hence, and do not make my Father's house a marketplace.'"

In this reading, the key phrase in the passage is what is known as a partitive appositive, in which the "all" refers to the items in the next clause. The difference can be seen in the King James Version's "and when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen," in contrast to the NRSV translation: "Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle."

In this modern translation, the makeshift whip is only for the animals, since, as Ernst Haenchen pointed out, "one cannot drive animals with hands alone." Craig Keener argues that narratively, the idea that Jesus is using the whip on people

makes no sense, since immediately after he is described as using the whip he addresses the dove sellers and commands them to pack up.

In Alexis-Baker's telling, the definitive break with early nonviolent readings of the scene comes with Augustine. The Donatist Petilian had complained that Catholics were violating Christ's teachings by engaging in violence. "The Lord Christ drove out the shameless merchants from the temple with whippings," Augustine responded. "So we find…Christ a persecutor.… Christ even bodily persecuted those whom he expelled from the temple."

Christ as persecutor—you can hear a sigh of relief across the centuries, as this development allows us to sanctify our darkest desires. It appears in Bernard of Clairvaux's argument that crusaders are "animated by the same zeal for the house of God which of old passionately inflamed their leader himself when he armed his most holy hands, not indeed with a sword, but with a whip." It appears in John Calvin's use of this Gospel passage to defend his role in burning Michael Servetus at the stake. And it was there in my own rather dubious comfort as I stood before El Greco's serenely violent interpretation of the scene.

But none of that can really be blamed, I think, on grammatical ambiguity. "To move from a little whip and overturning a table to firing machine guns, missiles and other modern weaponry is simply absurd," writes Alexis-Baker, "If Christians want to justify war and other forms of killing, they will need to look somewhere besides this passage."

I recently found an image of the scene I much prefer, Rembrandt's 1635 etching *Christ Driving the Money Changers from the Temple* (see pp. 18–19). It is a darker image, with Christ's face deeply shadowed as he clutches the raised whip and the merchants cower in a clump. Rays of light, represented by streaking lines, emanate from a halo at the center of the image. The halo is not over Christ's head. No, it surrounds the whip itself.

That's what I like about the etching. That clarifying blasphemy. In the gospels, the scene seems such a challenge to our modern order, where money permeates everything and spaces for the sacred are disappearing. In the Rembrandt etching, though, we see what we have so often over the centuries preferred to worship.

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POETRY

A DEVOTIONAL POEM

E. J. García

Please God make me strong—please, God, make me brave.
By "strong" I mean steady, steadying, built deep into you.
Do I mean "beautiful"? Like roses in Mary's hand or the nape of Sebastian's neck—
like a golden feather, like a ship aflame.
Make me—make *me*. I am clay and would like to be bronze. I am dull and would like to be bright.
Polish my shadow until I am brilliant as night.

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An Antidote to Despair

Isaac Holeman

How liberation theology shaped Paul Farmer's quest to make medicine more human

"Dear Polo, we miss you," wrote a Haitian health worker some twenty years ago, to the physician and medical anthropologist Paul Farmer. "We miss you as the cracked dry earth misses the rain." At the time Farmer reportedly commented, "After thirty-six hours? Haitians, man. They're totally over the top. My kind of people."

When Paul Farmer passed away in February at the age of sixty-two, the deluge of tributes on social media and major news outlets reminded us that his kind of people could be found in every place he had gone—and in some places where he hadn't. Young and old, rich and poor, atheist and Hindu and Catholic, people from many walks of life took inspiration from Farmer's quest to cure the world. Our aim, as he once put it, "is nothing less than the refashioning of our world into one in which no one starves, drinks impure water, lives in fear of the powerful and violent, or dies ill and unattended."

Dr. Paul Farmer at the cornerstone-laying ceremony for a new teaching hospital in Mirebalais, Haiti, September 10, 2010

ZUMA PRESS INC/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Like many of the other people Farmer mentored, I discovered his work by way of Tracy Kidder's inspiring biography *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2003). Hearing about the book as a college freshman, I put it on my birthday list and received it as a gift that May. I recall sitting down to read it one morning and finishing late in the evening of the same day. My eyes were aching, yet somehow I felt more energetic than I had in years. It was my first exposure to the idea that poor health is a kind of social injustice, and it gave me new eyes for the story of my brother, who was adopted from an orphanage in Guatemala City when he was four. Kidder's book also offered an irresistible image of Farmer as a real, imperfect, modern, funny, endearingly human person, one who was pursuing what seemed to me a saintly life. The book was just a snapshot of that life, and no doubt it concealed as much as it revealed. But anyone who read it would want to know more, and by the end of that summer I was deep in the pages of Farmer's own books.

I was not often taken to church as a child, and, perhaps for that reason, I was slow to appreciate the reverent, almost devotional quality of Farmer's following. Obituaries described him as a "giant of public health," the world's "most extraordinary medical humanitarian." Bill Clinton said he was "one of the most extraordinary people I have ever known." James Dear, a Jesuit priest who knew Farmer for decades, has argued that the Church should recognize him as a saint. On Twitter, the indie rock band Arcade Fire wrote that "Paul Farmer changed our lives forever. He showed us how to work harder for others than for yourself. He was the punkest mother f***er WE ever met. Steal from the rich and give to the poor. Make yourself useful. WE will keep fighting for Haiti until the end of time."

Many of the tributes published since Farmer's death celebrate his bedside manner and his work as a builder of hospitals, health systems, universities, and the movement for health equity. How on earth did he do it all? With the help of many others, as he was always quick to recognize. But then why did so many people want to help him? How did he spark such an earnest moral reckoning among such a diverse and devoted following? I believe we can begin to answer this question by turning to his own writing.

Farmer's scholarly writing spans several decades and a few different academic disciplines. Some of his books and articles are more approachable than others. Farmer's writing is often personal, describing the world as he saw it and walking readers through his own surprises, setbacks, and delights. Years ago, as I began to make my way through his books and scholarly articles, I discovered that his writing is unambiguously Catholic. He was not just a good Catholic who also happened to be a very good doctor, nor was he simply motivated by his faith to produce compelling secular ideas for a secular milieu. In order to understand his books and grasp the full power of his moral vision, I discovered I would need to study not only ethnography, infectious-disease ecology, and systems design, but also the gospels. I would also need to understand the emergence of liberation theology as a countercultural movement within the wider tradition of Catholic social teaching. These sources seemed to be an indispensable context for Farmer's writing, first because he referenced them frequently, but later because my increasing exposure to Catholic social thought allowed me to read between the lines of Farmer's work and see a deeper meaning in his project. He used the resources of the Catholic tradition to understand human suffering, to rebuke the principalities and powers that maintain the sorrows of the poor, and to nurture the fierce hopefulness for which he was so well known.

"Bearing witness" is a term with deep religious roots that were lost on me when I first encountered it in Farmer's 2003 book, *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor*. The first part of this book bears witness to poverty and poor health in Guatemala, Mexico, Haiti, Cuba, and Russia. In one instance, Farmer and Ophelia Dahl, co-founders of the health-care charity Partners In Health, found themselves in northern Guatemala. A local indigenous organization had requested their assistance for a mental-health project. The aim was to locate and disinter people whom the Guatemalan army had buried in mass graves during the country's thirty-six-year civil war. Why?

> Because the victims had been "buried with their eyes wide open." And neither they nor their kin would know peace until they were buried properly. "So that their eyes may close," explained Miguel, who, along with Julia, spoke as their leader. My own eyes were stinging, but not from the smoke. Again, a silence fell over us, this time a silence of complicity and solidarity. Ophelia spoke first, saying that we who would never know their suffering would try to do our part, and also that we would bear witness in the hope that such crimes could not be committed so readily in the future.

This scene beautifully conveys Farmer's humanizing vision of health equity. Here to "bear witness" is a pragmatic expression with broad appeal. Yet Farmer did not shy away from the term's religious roots, though he addressed the issue ethnographically rather than philosophically, by reflecting on the faith of the people he encountered in his work. In the following paragraphs he describes looking up from this meeting to see a small portrait of the recently martyred Bishop Juan José Gerardi, who was bludgeoned to death in 1998 after releasing a report that indicted the Guatemalan army for deaths and disappearances during the conflict. Farmer quotes the bishop's final speech before his death:

> In our country, the truth has been twisted and silenced. God is inflexibly opposed to evil in any form. The root of the downfall and the misfortune of humanity comes from the deliberate opposition to truth, which is the fundamental reality of God and of human beings. This reality has been intentionally distorted in our country throughout thirty-six years of war against the people.

Here we find a more biblical injunction against bearing false witness, not in Farmer's own words, but in a prophetic voice that he wanted us to hear.

"Structural violence" is one of the concepts Farmer relied on to make sense of poor health in such circumstances. To grasp the power and importance of this concept, we must first acknowledge that the poor are very often blamed for their own plight, as if personal choices or cultural differences could explain their condition. In the 1999 book *Infections and Inequalities*, Paul writes:

> The most frequently encountered and easily circulated theories about women and AIDS are far more likely to include punitive images of women as purveyors of infection—prostitutes, for example, or mothers who "contaminate" their innocent offspring—than to include images of homelessness, barriers to medical care, a social service network that doesn't work, and an absence of jobs and housing. Dominant readings are likely to suggest that women with AIDS have had large numbers of sexual partners, but are less likely to show how girls... are abducted into the flesh trade.

The way scientists and the media portray people living with HIV has improved since those words were written, but the underlying problem remains. As Farmer observes in his 2020 book, *Fevers, Feuds, and Diamonds: Ebola and the Ravages of History*, "discussions of epidemic disease in Africa make frequent use of the colonial era's exoticizing language: game becomes 'bushmeat,' burials become 'funerary rituals,' and the terms 'traditional' and 'native' appear regularly, in proximity to each other, as code for 'primitive.'" The impulse to blame the poor for their problems is often connected to

claims among the wealthy and powerful that we have little obligation, and perhaps little ability, to come to their aid in solidarity. Farmer's distinctive way of writing about the ravages of history forcefully dispels these myths. Centuries of slavery, resource extraction and ecological devastation, predatory international trade and debt policies, foreign support for violent dictators, and a raft of other obviously global problems create the conditions for Ebola, HIV, opioid abuse, and all the other modern plagues. "Structural violence" is one way of describing how these wider economic forces and ongoing social arrangements—systems we are all caught up in—put people in harm's way. In "Health, Healing, and Social Justice: Insights from Liberation Theology," which originally appeared as a chapter in *Pathologies of Power*, Farmer explains how liberation theology shaped this line of thinking, noting that what he calls structural violence has been described by many Latin-American priests and bishops as structural sin. Farmer cites Jon Sobrino, who describes such sin as an "absolute negation of God's will."

Understanding how large-scale social phenomena like sexism, racism, and poverty become evident in the failing health of oppressed people is particularly important when no individual wrongdoer can be singled out as the perpetrator of any particular act of violence. As Farmer would often say, real service to the poor involves understanding global poverty. He brought this insight to bear on his work with Partners In Health (PIH), whose mission statement bears quoting in its entirety:

> Our mission is to provide a preferential option for the poor in health care. By establishing long-term relationships with sister organizations based in settings of poverty, Partners In Health strives to achieve two overarching goals: to bring the benefits of modern medical science to those most in need of them and to serve as an antidote to despair. We draw on the resources of the world's elite medical and academic institutions and on the lived experience of the world's poorest and sickest communities. We are dedicated to providing the highest level of clinical care possible while alleviating the crushing social and economic burden of poverty that creates obstacles to health. At its root, our mission is both medical and moral. It is based on solidarity, rather than charity alone. When our patients are ill and have no access to care, our team of health professionals, scholars, and activists will do whatever it takes to make them well—just as we would do if a member of our own families—or we ourselves—were ill. We stand with our patients, some of the poorest and sickest victims of poverty and disease, in their struggle for equity and social justice.

Farmer always described PIH as a secular organization, yet this mission statement's opening mandate—to provide a preferential option for the poor—is a straightforward affirmation of liberation theology's central teaching. While liberation theology has sometimes been controversial within the Church, the preferential option for the poor has always been widely embraced, in part because there is such clear precedent for it in the gospels—and, specifically, in the example of Jesus. The preferential option means something more than giving people things. It means standing with the poor in solidarity, whatever the cost. As Archbishop Óscar Romero put it, "there is a criterion for knowing whether God is close to us or far away: all those who worry about the hungry, the naked, the poor, the disappeared, the tortured, the imprisoned—about any suffering human being—are close to God." An undergraduate at Duke University when Archbishop Romero was martyred, Farmer often mentioned how greatly this event affected him. As James Dear recalls in his February 23 *America* magazine tribute, "He attended the little prayer vigil that night on the campus, and as he later told me, it felt as if the scales fell from his eyes; he suddenly realized that to be a Christian meant you had to be on the side of the poor and to serve Christ in the poor."

PIH has provided a preferential option for the poor in many ways, and one strategy in particular has come to define the organization's inspiring global impact: making community health workers central to care delivery. Community health workers (CHWs) are trusted neighbors who live in the communities they serve, and under the same circumstances as their patients. When equipped with a few months of on-the-job training, good supervision, a living wage, supplies, and strong connections to local clinics, CHWs can make a remarkable difference for people who face barriers to health care. PIH conducted the first studies to demonstrate that, with the support of CHWs, people in the poorest places on earth could complete complex treatments for afflictions such as HIV and drug-resistant tuberculosis and achieve cure rates on par with those in the United States. Since then, study after study has confirmed that CHW programs are exceptionally affordable ways to improve health outcomes in poor areas. What makes a good CHW program successful is not any one clinical practice. The model is based on wrap-around social support—on making house calls, being available to come running when called, advocating for patients as needed. PIH's community health workers in Haiti are called *accompagnateurs*, because they *accompany* patients in the journey to good health.

The theme of accompaniment permeates Farmer's work but is perhaps most evident in his 2013 book *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations with Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez*. Gutiérrez is regarded by many as the father of liberation theology, and this book offers an intimate view of his decades-long friendship with Farmer. In the introduction, Michael Griffin and Jennie Weiss Block explain that Farmer and Gutiérrez both subscribe to what they call a "theology of accompaniment." Later in the book, Farmer explains what Fr. Gustavo's theology and accompaniment meant to him:

> I was surrounded in central Haiti by something that felt violent and oppressive—namely, deep poverty and the tail end of the Duvalier dictatorship. Violence was both everyday and structural—in the

words of one woman I met: it was the fight for wood, and water, and food. The people with whom I stayed lived in a squatter settlement because some of them had been displaced by a hydroelectric dam. This was their experience of structural violence. How does one make sense of this landscape of violence as a twenty-three-year-old American? I read a lot about the history of Haiti. I read great books that were about Haitian culture, including one about that particular valley where I lived, but I really took a lot of consolation from Gustavo's work.

In another part of the book Farmer remarks,

As long as poverty and inequality persist, as long as people are wounded and imprisoned and despised, we humans will need accompaniment—practical, spiritual, intellectual. It is for this reason, and for many others, that I am grateful for Father Gustavo's presence on this wounded but beautiful earth.

For Farmer, accompaniment was not only what desperately ill patients needed, it was also the kind of consolation and insight he found in the work of theologians like Gutiérrez. Accompaniment was also how Farmer talked about his relationship with students like me.

In *A Theology of Liberation* (1988) Gutiérrez writes that "if there is no friendship with the poor and no sharing of the life of the poor, then there is no authentic commitment to liberation, because love exists only among equals." When I read this, I recalled the time Paul Farmer had affectionately called me an idiot for asking him to autograph a copy of *In the Company of the Poor* that he had given me as a gift. We laughed as he showed me where he had already signed it. I sensed that the tone of my question had put him on too high a pedestal. He wanted friends, not fans. Paul had many friends in the universities and the halls of power, but he wanted to make friends in the squatter settlements of the world, too. This interpersonal philosophy may help explain his radical rejection of material comforts. Many, including his biographer Tracy Kidder, seemed amazed at how long this esteemed Harvard University professor lived in a small home in Haiti with a tin roof and no hot water. People who knew him could tell you many similar stories: how he slept in a church rectory to save money during medical school; how he sent his paychecks to PIH only to go broke himself; how he skipped lunch because he'd given his meal to a homeless man; how he needed to borrow socks from a friend because he'd been traveling too long and simply ran out. He was like a twenty-first-century mendicant in travel-worn suit and tie. If Paul's ideas were deeply Catholic, so were his sacrifices, and his humanizing way of life—as he would put it, totally over the top.

Let's return to the question with which we began: how did Paul Farmer find himself at the center of an extraordinary global movement for a more humane world? It's unlikely he could have attracted such a devoted following through works alone, by brilliance or work ethic or luck. The dean of Brown University's School of Public Health, Ashish Jha, got closer to the mark when he claimed in the *Atlantic* that Farmer redefined the global health field to make it more human, in part by being so wonderfully human himself. Bill Gates wrote that there will never be another Paul Farmer. That's true in a certain obvious sense, but we do ourselves and Farmer a disservice if we assume that he was simply born that way, that he was so very much better at being good than very nearly everyone else we've met, as if virtue were a quirk of personality. To call him a saint is perhaps no less extravagant a claim, yet thinking of him in this way places him within a group of other wonderfully human people, and suggests something important about how he became who he was. I believe that Farmer *chose* his way of life, and that he understood it in spiritual terms. If we dare to challenge ourselves the way Farmer often challenged us, we could acknowledge that each of us has opportunities every day to make decisions that would turn our lives in a direction more like his. Farmer's books still provide important signposts for the journey. They are now, sadly, the only way we can still call on Farmer to accompany us in our struggles.

Or so I thought, when I started writing this article. A few days after Farmer died, a dear friend sent me a message to tell me he had been thinking of me. He said, "I know Paul would fully expect us to continue walking together. I also believe he equipped you, and all of us, and will continue to do so, for this journey." That friend and I co-founded Medic together many years ago, a global health non-profit that—like Muso, Pivot, GlobeMed, MASS Design Group, Community Health Impact Coalition, and many others—was inspired by Farmer and only possible because of his pragmatic solidarity.

I was still pondering this message a week later, as I was working on this article. It was Ash Wednesday, so I had gone to Mass and was picturing where this journey had taken me—around the world and back many times, to St. Gabriel's Hospital in rural Malawi, among other places. We launched Medic's first project there, and it was in that hospital that I had *really* learned to pray. Eventually I was baptized in the hospital's little chapel. Just over a decade later, as my local parish prayed to "all the angels and saints," I realized that I was picturing Paul's face. And then, reluctantly, I understood that Doctor Paul would still accompany me in prayer, should I find myself facing down a failure of imagination or striving for an antidote to despair. In the grief at his passing, many of us have wondered how the movement for health equity will go on without his tireless accompaniment. If we were to ask him, there's a chance he'd say, with a wink and a smile, that he's passed another mountain top and is just getting started.

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THE TIME TO ASK QUESTIONS HAS PASSED

Judith Skillman

Sunset, and the rains are over. Stout birds sing.
There are no children here and none visit.
The body is its own quarry. An eye
turns inward, notes of Bach fly alone.
A contagious spring reigns in the garden.
Crescendo of purple clouds, lime green leaflets,
bawdy weather unsuited to the mood.
Soon, in the dark, the old depression
lifts. Leo Tolstoy's Nikita
wakes in the sleigh beneath his master
to live twenty more years as laborer.
To measure with his steps how many straws
it takes to warm a horse in winter.
Three toes gone from each foot, still he walks.

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Childish Gambino dances in the music video for "This Is America."

YOUTUBE/VEVO

Counter-Spells

Alejandro Nava

The street theology of hip-hop challenges the idols of our time.

I've been thinking a lot about Thomas Merton's infamous street epiphany lately, when the Trappist monk had the sudden and jolting revelation that God is uncontainable and omnipresent, capable of appearing in every fleck and filament of creation, in all things near to, and far from, familiar sites of the sacred. Merton's epiphany, so his account goes, occurred at the corner of 4th Street and Walton in Louisville, as the walls that had separated him from the bustling masses came crashing down and he realized that he was one with them. The experience left him a changed man, his soul now fired by a dream of justice that spilled over the boundaries of the monastery. He had once stepped away from the world to seek God, and now this vision inspired a return, leading him to a deeper involvement with events of the day, especially the civil-rights and anti-war movements.

Merton's revelation, of course, has a rich and ancient pedigree in Catholic thought, apparent in Jesus' parables and sketches of grace among persons, places, and things considered unclean; in Meister Eckhart's insistence that God is present in the stable and fireside as much as in the churches; in Ignatius of Loyola's conviction that God is in all things; and in liberation theology's intuition that one can encounter God in the face of the poor and oppressed, the stranger and the refugee.

Such theological intuitions have also been at the root of my own interest in hip-hop, a subject that has occupied my teaching and scholarship for close to two decades now. I introduced a class on this subject at the University of Arizona in the early 2000s, intent on exploring the intersections of the sacred and profane in hip-hop, a culture that includes graffiti writing, b-boying, deejaying/beat-making, and the art of emceeing or rapping. I didn't grow up surrounded by books—I was the first in my Mexican-American family to graduate from college—so rappers were the first to enchant me with their verbal skills. They introduced me to the rich possibilities of language, how vowels and consonants can be stretched or swallowed, how meaning can exist on the surface of the sound alone, how words can flow and move together like a school of fish. And they introduced me, long before I read the words of liberation theology or Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, to the presumption that God could be found in surprising and unexpected locations, that the word of God could carry in the wind and fall on one's ears like a "shout in the street."

I recall heading to class at the University of Chicago, where I was a graduate student, with Tupac, Public Enemy, Nas, OutKast, and Cypress Hill ringing in my ears and rattling my bones. Part of their allure, I see now, was the way their beats and rhymes not only complemented my interest in Afro-Latino theologies, but acknowledged and celebrated underprivileged backgrounds, lending dignity to places and peoples that had been routinely demeaned in American history. There are moments in hip-hop when the power of the music can melt away all the barriers that separate us from the poor of the world, reminding us that we share the same humanity, the same fate. To paraphrase Merton again, it's like waking from a dream of separateness and elitism, of spurious self-isolation.

Over the years, I started to notice how frequently similar epiphanies occurred in hip-hop, how the subject of God constantly surfaced. I had noticed this before—this is what inspired my class, after all—but it was more pervasive than I had assumed. Religious themes are less a passing storm than a consistent weather pattern in hip-hop. In this way, hip-hop mirrors the religious appetites of African Americans and Latinos in general. (A 2007 Pew Forum study found that African Americans ranked as "the most religiously committed racial or ethnic group in the nation," with Latinos not far behind.) Gradually, I began to pay greater attention to how rappers tussled with God, how they turned seemingly profane verses into sanctified oratory, whooping and discoursing like inspired preachers.

If God can be found in all things, and Black music had long been suffused with gospel shouts, sweet soul swoops, and emotions that resembled rapture, the crosscurrents of the sacred and the profane in hip-hop shouldn't have come as too much of a surprise, but I still found myself amazed by the reach of religion in the music. Hidden in plain sight, it was a major concern of countless rappers, from many of the classic hip-hop tracks of the 1980s and '90s—for example, in KRS-One's *Spiritual Minded* (2002) or Ice Cube's *Death Certificate* (1991)—to work by hip-hop luminaries of the new millennium: Kanye West's *The Life of Pablo* (2016) and *Jesus is King* (2019), Chance the Rapper's *Coloring Book* (2016), Kendrick Lamar's *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (2012). You could even find it in the stuff of reggaetoneros, like Vico C's *La Recta Final*, (1989) and Bad Bunny's *OASIS* (2019).

Such work has led me to see the genre in theological terms, as a form of "street scriptures" or "street theology." It has led me to probe hip-hop for its prophetic and emancipatory possibilities. Sometimes these are political and protest-oriented. More often, they are expressions of defiance through dance and celebration, rebellion expressed as an abundance of joy. Though there have always been elements of both prophecy and revelry in hip-hop, the past decade or so has seen a clear renaissance of the former—the musical equivalent of a fist raised in the air.

In Russia, for instance, opposition voices have embraced hip-hop as an ideal medium for political activism, prompting a crackdown on the music. ("Russia's Youth Found Rap. The Kremlin Is Worried," reads a *New York Times* headline from 2019.) In Cuba, the 2021 rap "Patria y Vida" ("Homeland and Life") came to define the unrest and rebellion occurring on the island. An appeal for life and liberty, the rap reclaims the slogan from the Cuban revolution, "Patria o Muerte" ("Homeland or Death") and turns it into a cry for change: "*Ya no gritemos patria o muerte sino patria y vida*." ("We no longer shout homeland or death, but homeland and life instead.") Throughout the Caribbean and Latin America, in fact, various indigenous, Afro-Latino, and mestizo rappers are wielding the mic like a sword, their words increasingly cutting and dangerous.

Don't get me wrong: hip-hop has always been flawed and ambiguous, and it sometimes deserves its reputation as devil's music. But what may seem predictable, uniform, and flat to a distant observer can contain remarkable depth, variety, and beauty when you plunge into the subject itself. Immersed in this way, the listener will begin to notice the genre's remarkable inventiveness, its love of rhyme and rhetorical extravagance, its testimonials of racial injustice, its longing for freedom and equality, its pining for God.

Besides the fact that in the ancient world sacred scripture would have been delivered in a lyrical, rap-like manner—chanted, declaimed, and sung in a ways that set it apart from ordinary speech—the way in which the Scriptures were originally composed bears a resemblance to the making of hip-hop, the two of them sharing a composite and collagist aesthetic.

David Tracy has argued that theology is best understood in this way, as a constellation of fragments, or as a rich and colorful tapestry of interwoven filaments. The Bible itself, a collage of various textual pieces and oral traditions stitched together by a masterful weaver of sorts, is a good example of this. Less the product of single authors than editors or redactors, biblical texts were composed and arranged by sampling, cutting, splicing, and rearranging threads of tradition. Instead of creating them out of thin air, biblical authors composed their texts out of preexisting stories, joining them together in beautiful and graceful patterns. "It is quite apparent," Robert Alter explains about the Hebrew and Christian Bibles in *The Art of Bible Translation*, "that a concept of composite artistry, of literary composition through a collage of textual materials, was generally assumed to be normal procedure in ancient Israelite culture."

Hip-hop, of course, is made in a similar fashion—by reusing and remixing the existing sounds and colors of the world. The greatest beat-makers of the culture—a Pete Rock, Marley Marl, DJ Premier, J Dilla, or Mannie Fresh—would sample a song of choice, chopping it into pieces and then rebuilding it into something new and fresh. A drum loop from James Brown, a horn riff from John Coltrane, a bass line from Parliament, marching snares from Mardi Gras, a piano run from Nina Simone, harmony from R&B and soul, a touch of gospel, classical strings, a Brazilian samba guitar, the cacophonous noises of the city, the raw diction of urban youth: hip-hop is nothing if not a collection of fragments, the music arranged and layered together by an expert deejay/producer/programmer so that it coheres in a mosaic-like design.

If there are echoes of scriptural traditions in the style of hip-hop, the tougher question is whether there are also echoes of scripture in the content of hip-hop. The answer, naturally, is yes and no, depending on the artist in question.

In the case of Lauryn Hill's remarkable album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998), the answer is an emphatic yes. This album set a new benchmark for what hip-hip could be. In the mid-to-late 1990s, rap had taken a turn toward the frivolous and festive after the deaths of Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls in 1996 and 1997, respectively—as if the age needed some degree of escapism to cope with the losses. At some point, however, the banal celebrations of ghetto fab—the "shiny suit" era's flaunting of cars, riches, jewels, sex, designer fashions—started to sound monotonous. At some point, we needed a bite of reality, and that's exactly what Lauryn Hill's album offered.

Even her fashion choices, before anything was said or sung, spoke volumes about her convictions. Like Samson's hair, Hill's manner and style were part of her superpowers. They were hip in an unruly way; they signaled she was not to be messed with. She sported dreadlocks, sometimes twisted and coiled in cornrows, always slick. Her clothes—leather jackets, retro tops and jeans, African and Jamaican colors and textures—were both chic and rebellious; they complemented her natural beauty without reducing her to a sex object. She had touches of Jamaican reggae in her, splashes of 1970s funk and soul, traces of Public Enemy's militancy, and the flair and emotion of gospel. These choices of self-presentation identified her with the struggle of Black folk around the globe, connected her with refugees and agitators, and defined her as a countercultural icon.

As for the soundscape, live instruments and layered harmonies evoked the music of the 1970s, dancehall reggae and patois-inflected raps evoked the Caribbean, and, of course, the spiritual content evoked communal and religious notes from an older past, going back to the age of the spirituals and gospel. "Gospel music is music inspired by the gospels," Hill remarked about the inspiration for *Miseducation*. "In a huge respect, a lot of this music turned out to be just that. During this album, I turned to the Bible and wrote songs that I drew comfort from."

More than just comforting, though, *Miseducation* was also defiant and edgy. Hill stood in the lineage of Black music—the lineage of Nina Simone, Aretha Franklin, Sam Cooke, and Al Green—formed by soul-shaking, body-quaking, house-wrecking religion. On one track you might hear warm gospel vocals; on the next, she was blowing rival rappers away like chaff. The result was all things to all people: now tender and sensitive, now bluesy and wistful, now sanctifying and prayerful, and sometimes, in the spirit of hip-hop, rugged and confrontational.

Take "Lost Ones," one of the most hammering displays of lyricism on the album, its percussive flow of words complementing its hardcore hip-hop beats and record scratches. (The hook samples Sister Nancy's dancehall hit "Bam Bam" from 1982.) It begins with a declaration of personal emancipation and then turns into a dis: "My emancipation don't fit your equation / I was on the humble / You on every station / Some wanna play young Lauryn like she's dumb / But remember not a game new under the sun." In the late 1990s, rap's standard formula—a combination of flaunting one's wealth, drug hype, and supersized masculinity—had a hard time knowing what to do with a female rapper like Lauryn Hill. The hip-hop of that period often featured displays of subversive fun, anything to keep one's mind off the spikes in homicide, bulging prisons, the poverty of the inner city. Older generations, facing such problems, did what they could to confront and challenge the system; hip-hop of the late 1990s seemed to be doing everything it could to claw its way to the top of that system and claim it as one's own. Lauryn Hill, needless to say, found that dream empty:

> Now, now how come your talk turn cold
> Gained the whole world for the price of your soul….
> Now you're all floss
> What a sight to behold
> Wisdom is better than silver and gold

ZUMA PRESS, INC./ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Lauryn Hill performs at Irving Plaza, New York, October 25, 1999.

I was hopeless now I'm on hope road
Every man wants to act like he's exempt
When he needs to get down on his knees and repent
Can't slick talk on the day of judgment.

"Final Hour," another one of Hill's fast-moving, declamatory raps, continues in the same vein, warning about the high price of fame and fortune and the danger of neglecting the values of the soul. Like the prophets Moses and Aaron, whom she invokes, Hill decries idolatrous attachments to worldly treasures—"watch out what you cling to"—and envisions a revolutionary upheaval, the kind that would fix attention on the poor instead of the rich, on outcasts and slaves instead of the princes of the world. Echoing the central tenet of liberation theology, she calls for a soul-altering change, a conversion that would prioritize the needs of the poor above all else: "I'm about to change the focus from the richest to the brokest / I wrote this opus to reverse the hypnosis." Haranguing and cajoling at once, *Miseducation* was intended to re-educate Hill's listeners, to break the spell that enthralls people to the sparkle of American capitalism. These tracks are counter-spells.

Many of the other songs on the album are more syncretistic, crossing boundaries between R&B, rap, soul, and reggae. They foreshadow melody's take-over of rap in the early aughts, post Drake. One of the most popular hits on the album, "To Zion," was Hill's powerful hymn to her newborn son, from whom it gets its name. That name, of course, derives from the Bible: Zion is a synonym for Jerusalem, and Hill rhapsodizes in the song in ways that recall Jeremiah's giddy anticipation of a day when the people "shall gather and sing aloud on the heights of Zion.... Then shall young women rejoice in the dance / and the young men and the old shall be merry" (Jeremiah 31:12–13). Verse one begins with a measured delivery until Hill's swelling joy, growing and kicking like the child in her womb, proves too much to contain in rapped verse and spills over into exalted harmonies: "The joy

"This is America" chronicles a world in exile from the heavenly realm. Instead of moving forward, leaving past bigotries and brutalities behind us, history drags us backward, as in a moonwalk. Time is out of joint.

of my world is in Zion," she croons with joy and delight. Hill was advised to terminate the life within her so that she could focus on her career. The song is about her refusal to follow this advice. Instead, she chose to see her child as a miraculous blessing in her life, a gift, not a curse. Suffused with the wonder of childbirth, the entire song is framed by the dream of Jeremiah, as well as by the story of the Annunciation, where the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, a terrified and unwed young woman, and tells her that she will conceive and bear a son who will bring good news to the world. "But then an angel came one day," Hill sings, "Told me to kneel down and pray / For unto me a man-child would be born." Notice the formal, elevated speech of the King James Bible: street slang is common throughout the album, but here Hill makes use of a consecrated and stately diction, redolent of the archaic, dignified language of Scripture. This diction suggests that something out of the ordinary is happening to her, and she waxes ecstatic about it.

"I wanted it to be a revolutionary song about a spiritual movement," Hill remarked in an interview, "and also about my spiritual change, going from one place to another because of my son." Her comment applies to the album as a whole. One can even trace a spiritual development in the track list: it travels from anger and lament, in the opening rap of "Lost Ones," to serenity, ending with the sublime "Tell Him"—a song of pure prayer and praise. It quotes St. Paul's famous panegyric on love in 1 Corinthians 13 word for word. There's nothing inventive in the song's lyrics; its originality is to be found in Hill's gorgeous phrasing, the notes bending, stretching, and sighing throughout the track. She caresses the verses with such sensitivity and nuance that they suddenly seem new and fresh, no matter how many times you've heard them before.

The music of *Miseducation* soars to sublime heights without losing its bearing here on earth. It does not overlook the struggle for racial, gender, and class equality at the heart of Black history and Black aesthetics. In this respect, the album itself, and not just its title, owes something to Carter Woodson's classic work *The Miseducation of the Negro* (1933). If the purpose of Woodson's book was to revolutionize the education of Black students—awakening racial consciousness, advancing moral and spiritual development, engaging social and political matters, and wrestling with philosophical questions—Hill's *Miseducation* shares a similar purpose. It is an album that offers its own holistic pedagogy, a pedagogy of and for the oppressed. It bravely addresses social questions, questions of race and gender, but it also speaks of spiritual crisis and personal redemption. It draws all its fragments—its various musical and thematic elements—into a coherent and memorable work of art.

Fast-forward a couple of decades and we find ourselves in an entirely new climate completely at odds with the sunny, unclouded disposition of the "shiny suit" era. Childish Gambino's "This Is America," a song and video that epitomizes these troubled times, opens with South African choral melodies, cheery and placid, a perfect harmony of female a cappella vocals. The musical accompaniment is bare and minimal at the start, a light pattern of metal jingles from a rain stick or Egyptian tambourine, a slow finger-picked acoustic guitar, and bright and breezy male voices crooning the lines "We just wanna party / Party just for you / We just want the money / Money just for you." Childish Gambino enters the picture, strolling and dancing his way to a shoeless Black man strumming his guitar—a nostalgic image from the bucolic age of blues and folk music. After striking a "Jump Jim Crow" pose (hand on hip, leg bent, back contorted), Childish Gambino proceeds to pull out a gun and fire a blast at the bluesman's head. The effect is shocking, brutal, grotesque, a jolting disruption of the carefree and blithe opening. Like a surrealistic image from the films of Luis Buñuel, the scene, and what follows, is dreadful and traumatizing, a subversive commentary on America's addictions to guns, its racism and materialism, and social media.

And the music registers it all: as Childish Gambino commits the murder, wearing a hollow and callous grin, totally indifferent to the victim, the music abruptly shifts from lighthearted folk melodies to the sinister, menacing, and street-savvy sound of trap music. What began as a cool breeze, a gentle strum of a folk guitar, suddenly leaps into another register, the winds now howling, the sky darkening, and the violently charged atmosphere producing rattling thunderclaps and lashing rain. The low-end bass, a heavy monotone thud, sounds ill-omened; the high-pitched synthesizer is eerie and dreadful; the drum-machine claps are spine-chilling, like the sound of waves slapping the side of a sinking boat; and Childish Gambino delivers his lines in fragmented, gnomic, and lurching bits, sputtering through the song as though he's running out of gas. The song chronicles, in all, a world in exile from the heavenly realm. Instead of moving forward, leaving past bigotries and brutalities behind us, history drags us backward, as in a moonwalk. Time is out of joint.

Apocalyptic signs are pervasive in the video too: a hooded figure on a white horse, galloping in the background, evokes the horsemen of the Apocalypse in Revelation; crowds of people, rioting or simply running in terror, are scattered throughout; police cars with their lights flashing denote a state of emergency; there are burning cars, falling dead bodies, a brutally slain gospel choir and, at the end, Childish Gambino fleeing in absolute terror, his eyes bulging, muscles straining, and torso stretched forward as if he is lunging to escape not only the threats that hound him, but his very body. Much like the obscure and nightmarish imagery of Revelation—grotesque beasts that represent Roman aggression and persecution, warhorses as symbols of Death and Hades running roughshod over the innocent, allegories of exile and the sack of Jerusalem in 70 CE—the song is a jumbled collection of fragments, epitomizing our degraded and conflicted present, with America now replacing Rome.

The chaos and violence of the video blurs the line between the apocalypticism of the biblical tradition and the tragedy of the ancient Greeks, the former convinced that there is a redemptive arc in history, the latter viewing history as wreckage littered with countless wasted lives and irredeemable deaths. Still, if the song lacks a definitive revelation and avoids identifying a clear culprit, there is surely a burning message here. Just as the book of Revelation once urged resistance to the Roman Empire, "This Is America" seems to urge resistance to both the pressures of pop culture and the horrors of America's gun violence and racism. Notice the reverence for the gun in the video: it's swaddled in cloth and carried with great care as though it's a sacred object. Human lives, by contrast, are treated with relative indifference; gun rights matter more than human rights.

The music, meanwhile, is banging and thunderous. Besides communicating the feeling of urban confinement, the trap beats of the song—808 kick drums, crisp snares, fluttering hi-hats, and dark-sounding synthesizers—are grimy, fatalistic, and chilling. Their frequencies are a commentary on the claustrophobic pressures of the Trump era: the empty and titillating forms of pop culture, the moral numbness and nihilism, the racial anxieties and tensions, the despair and loneliness, and the casual acceptance of outrageous injustice and cruelty.

While so much madness plays out in the world, Childish Gambino dances and preens with schoolchildren behind him. They seem totally oblivious to the deaths and catastrophes around them. At least ten different dances, from the South African Gwara Gwara (popularized by DJ Bongz's song "Ofana Nawe") to the "Shoot" dance of BlocBoy JB, are showcased in the video. Childish Gambino's movements are particularly revealing, as they embody the conflicting themes and emotions of the song, the dialectical clashes of joy and tragedy, vanity and social awareness. Sinuous and spasmodic at the same time, his body captures the agony and elegance of Black history in America. I see a slight resemblance, too, to the moves of the undead in Michael Jackson's "Thriller"—a fitting resemblance since "This Is America" portrays a culture beset by deadening and zombie-like forces. References to "straps" (guns), "bags" (money or drugs), designer brands (Gucci), whippin' (cooking up drugs, making money, or driving expensive cars), and rampant narcissism ("I'm so cold," "I'm so dope," "I'm so pretty," etc.) are threaded through the song. It parodies America's addictions to pain-killing narcotics and toys—things that have the power to turn their users into zombies. Homicides, racial violence, injustice, acts of terror, all these things happen while Childish Gambino and his backup dancers go on dancing as if nothing has happened, posing for selfies, checking their followers on social media, and worrying about getting money. This is America.

T. S. Eliot famously observed that human beings cannot bear too much reality; we all seek shelter in fictions and fancies. "This Is America" questions the kinds of fictions and fancies in which Americans now live. It contests the most shallow and self-indulgent fancies of American pop culture, the banalities that reduce the Black experience in America to exotic and demeaning caricatures.

And yet, notwithstanding the bitter, tragic wisdom that the song delivers, how can one possibly miss the sheer beauty of the music, rapping, and dancing, the visual theater of it all? Here carnival coexists with apocalypse, celebration with violence and terror. There is a dazzling array of artistic styles in the video, all elegantly arranged by Childish Gambino, Ludwig Göransson, and the Japanese American filmmaker Hiro Murai. Fragments of these styles are reassembled in the video into a mosaic of Black life that does more than simply mirror our tattered lives; it also puts on festive display the rich surplus of Black arts in America, the accumulated genius of slaves and their descendants. While the chilling soundscape pushes the song to the edge of an abyss, the colorful parade of beauty in the video makes the song throb with an abundance of life and joy. Too often undervalued by "socially conscious" hip-hop, dance is cherished in "This Is America," celebrated for the way it expresses transcendence in steps, gestures, and spins that require no commentary.

I'd like to think that Thomas Merton, witnessing so much beauty, so many incisive insights about modern life, would have come to appreciate the lowly street wisdom conveyed by "This Is America," and by the culture of hip-hop more generally. Having emptied himself of the feeling of superiority toward ghetto and barrio dwellers—the inventors of hip-hop—he might have gone on to develop a greater sympathy and affection for the art that arose out of the corners and traps of the modern world. It might even have made him dance.

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A person enters the Cathedral in Beauvais, France.

IGOR MARKOV / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

After Christendom

Frederick Bauerschmidt

Two books from France address the future of Catholicism in a post-Christian society.

Jean-Luc Marion (b. 1946) and Chantal Delsol (b. 1947) are both prominent French philosophers who are very public about their Roman Catholicism. This alone would put them, in the minds of many of their fellow citizens, into "conservative" political and cultural camps, though the truth is considerably more complicated. This past year saw the appearance in English translation of Marion's 2017 book, *A Brief Apology for a Catholic Moment*, and the publication of Delsol's *La Fin de la Chrétienté*. Both of these short works grapple with the role of the Church in a dechristianized culture; both show the complex negotiations required to steer between what Marion calls the "twin and rival disasters" of integralism, which seeks to establish a Christian social order, and progressivism, which risks letting any distinctively Christian identity evaporate.

Religion has, of course, played a very different role in modern, highly secular France than it has in the United States (which Delsol calls a *pays biblico-revolutionnaire*—a biblical-revolutionary land), but the differences may not be as great as is sometimes claimed. As shown by the "Quiet Revolution" in Quebec in the 1960s, and by more recent cultural changes in Ireland, the secularization of seemingly robust religious cultures can happen very quickly, and there is reason to think that our own country is undergoing just

such a shift. So Marion and Delsol's books can help us contemplate our own likely more secular future.

Jean-Luc Marion first came to the attention of English-speaking readers three decades ago with the publication in translation of *God Without Being*. This work of philosophical theology embraced the postmodern critique of "onto-theology" while drawing some surprising conclusions from that critique, including a robust defense of that seemingly most ontological of theological doctrines: transubstantiation. Because of its sometimes counterintuitive intellectual moves and its postmodern Heideggerian idiolect, this book helped secure Marion's reputation as a challenging and highly speculative thinker. But Marion is also a practicing Catholic who cares passionately about the place of the Church in the postmodern world. In *A Brief Apology* he offers what he characterizes as an exercise in practical reasoning in an interrogative mode, pursuing the question of the role Catholics can and should play in French society. (Like Delsol, he makes only passing reference to non-Catholic Christians.)

Marion argues that the situation in France, and the West in general, is so dire that in order to avoid complete societal dissolution, "we must make an appeal to all the resources and all the strengths. Even the Catholic ones." He chooses to characterize this situation as "decadence," rather than "crisis." This decadence is in fact "a crisis of crisis," by which he means something like what Nietzsche meant by modern nihilism in his *Twilight of the Idols*: "'I do not know where I am or what I am to do; I am everything that knows not where it is or what to do,'—sighs the modern man." This also echoes the critique of modernity made over half a century ago by Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of Marion's intellectual mentors, in *The Moment of Christian Witness*. It is precisely by the infinite deferral of the moment of crisis that the modern world defeats the Gospel, since the Gospel is a call to crisis that demands a decision. The modern allergy to crisis undermines not only Catholicism but also Western society itself. "We are not falling into the abyss, we are suffering from a stagnant decadence."

Marion employs Augustine's critique of Rome as a republic that failed to embody true justice, which requires worship of the true God. Marion argues that because divine grace gives Christians access to justice, "they alone can uphold, always only partially, but always effectively, earthly cities to which they fundamentally do not belong." It is precisely the "outsider" status of Christians in society that allows them to press beyond narrow national interests to true justice and communion. The French Republic's motto—*liberté, égalité, fraternité*—is realizable only if there is a universal paternity that unites all people: "The only Father conceivable who can ensure just and actual brotherhood, because it ensures union in communion, is found in heaven; only from there can it come to earth." Marion quickly notes that the Republic, being a secular state, obviously cannot incorporate this into its motto, much less into its constitution, yet "Catholics can witness to this paternity in a society of orphans."

Given the strong connection he draws between Christianity and true justice, Marion's embrace of the secularity (*laïcité*) of the French Republic might seem surprising. This embrace distances him from integralism and its arguments in favor of a Christian political order, which he dismisses as "an illusion." But he does it also for positive theological reasons, invoking thinkers such as Ivan Illich and Charles Taylor to argue that first Judaism and then Christianity "desacralize" the world, and worldly politics along with it. His exposition and defense of *laïcité* depend upon a dual use of this term: on the one hand, it can be a neutral word for the secular sphere's renunciation of competence in religious matters; on the other, it can mean an aggressively secular anti-religion. The more neutral sense of the term simply identifies a realm distinct from the sacred, part of the structure of difference that is integral to the providential order of the world. *Laïcité* in the negative sense is precisely the violation of this structure of difference, an overstepping of the profane into the realm of the sacred, the former banishing and replacing the latter. Marion writes that this sort of *laïcité* could become "a fourth monotheism, like the first monotheism without God, the most abstract and therefore the most dangerous."

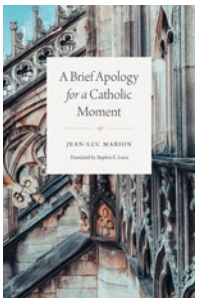
In defending a positive notion of *läicité*, Marion appeals to Pascal's distinction between the orders of bodies, minds, and charity to argue for the incommensurability of these three orders and for the primacy of the order of charity. This distinction "allows us to identify the neutrality of the state with the first order"—i.e. the state's proper sphere of concern is the bodily acts of its citizens—"and to validate its *positive* powerlessness to see (and, what is more, to judge) the order of mind (freedom of thought, research, etc.) and above all the order of charity (freedom of conscience, of belief and unbelief, or 'religion' and of change of religion)." True *laïcité* requires that the state embrace its blindness and incompetence with regard to religious belief. Marion draws from Pascal here, but an American might be forgiven for hearing echoes of John Courtney Murray.

When Marion turns to the positive contribution the Church can make to society, he points again to the "outsider" or "otherworldly" status of Christians: "They make the world less unlivable, because their aim is not to set themselves up in it in perpetuity, but to begin to live in the world according to another logic, and in fact they already belong to another world." The Christian orientation toward another logic, another world, and ultimately to a transcendent Other, lies at the heart of Marion's account of what Christianity offers to the postmodern West. He sees the triumph of the market in the West as a form of practical nihilism that obliterates difference by reducing everything to its economic value: "The economy rests on a possibility of abstraction, which reduces each and every thing to money, and thus establishes equivalence between things that in reality have nothing in common; whence the possibility of universal exchange." Our mania to put a price tag on everything

obliterates difference, reducing it to a monetary sameness in which things are distinguished not qualitatively but quantitatively. Such a reduction destroys our capacity to apprehend a good that is qualitatively other.

This is the societal manifestation of Nietzsche's will-to-power, the will that wills no good except its own increase. Such a will, Marion writes, makes a person "a slave of the worst of masters, himself," and to be liberated from this bondage involves "attaining and setting up a thing for a good, a thing in itself, which is a thing outside of me." This is precisely what Christianity offers: "He alone tears himself from nihilism who, in imitating Christ, succeeds in not willing his own will (to will), in order to will *elsewhere* and *from elsewhere*." Such a good can become the common good of a society because, while irreducibly other in its transcendence over the world, it is not abstract in the way monetary value is; rather, it is concretely "accomplished in the Trinity and manifested in a trinitarian manner by Christ." This offers "a political model that is at base non-political…a community that aims at communion, because in fact it comes from communion."

The appeal to the life of the Trinity and the life of God incarnate provides an opening for Marion to conclude his *Brief Apology* with a discussion of the phenomenon of the gift, a theme he has explored in other works. Rejecting the model of "gift-exchange," which links giving and getting, Marion sees gift as following "the logic of erotic phenomena": "It creates the eventual conditions of a gift in return, but does not depend on the reality of the return on investment, or expect it." This erotic logic helps address the issue of the exercise of power by Christians. Because the gift is given without expectation of return, the Catholic citizen can, like Christ himself, offer to the political community his or her gift of witness to true communion without demanding political power either as a precondition or an expected award.



A BRIEF APOLOGY FOR A CATHOLIC MOMENT

JEAN-LUC MARION
TRANS. BY STEPHEN E. LEWIS
University of Chicago Press
$22.50 | 120 pp.

LA FIN DE LA CHRÉTIENTÉ

CHANTAL DELSOL
Cerf
$28.22 | 176 pp.

Unlike Marion, Chantal Delsol is a thinker already known for her political philosophy and *La Fin de la Chrétienté* ("The End of Christendom") continues an already well-developed line of inquiry. Her approach, influenced by her teacher Julien Freund and his appropriation of the thought of Max Weber, is marked by a philosophical anthropology that acknowledges the social and historical construction of human identity without totally abandoning the idea of human nature. In this sense, her project is not unlike that of Alasdair MacIntyre. It leads her to pay close attention to the play of historical contingencies in such notions as human dignity. Rather than a static identity, human nature is a dynamic, evolving reality—indeed, if anything is "essential" to our nature it is our ceaseless desire to exceed that nature. As she writes memorably of the human person in her book, *Qu'est-ce que l'homme?* ("What Is a Human Being?"): "Rooted, he wants to be emancipated from his roots. Put another way, he seeks an inaccessible dwelling place through a succession of temporary way stations." The result is an Augustinian anthropology of the "restless heart" inflected by postmodern historical consciousness. All of this informs her account of the fate of Christianity in the contemporary West.

English speakers might be misled by the title of *La Fin de la Chrétienté*. The term *Chréienté* refers not to what we would call "Christianity," understood as a community of belief and practice (what the French call *christienisme*), but rather to the socio-political formation that we refer to as "Christendom." Delsol describes this as "the civilization inspired, ordered, guided by the Church," which endured for sixteen centuries, beginning with Theodosius's victory in the Battle of the Frigid River in 394 AD, but which is now in its death throes. Delsol's book might be thought of as a preemptive autopsy, comparing a dying Christendom with the death of pagan civilization in the late ancient world—a death brought about by Christendom itself.

Delsol begins by examining how a Church that so resolutely resisted modernity for two centuries in the name of Christian civilization has since the 1960s come to embrace such modern values as religious freedom—values utterly at odds with Christendom. She offers an analysis of early twentieth-century fascism and corporatism as integralist attempts to save Christendom that "proved to be worse than the disease." Animated by a utopian nostalgia that proved to be merely the mirror image of modernity's utopian futurism, these sorts of movements fell prey to those, such as Charles Maurras, who wanted Christendom but couldn't care less about Christianity itself. In the end, Delsol argues, such movements proved to be nothing but "the convulsions of a dying Christendom."

While both Marion and Delsol see integralism as a doomed effort to resuscitate Christendom, Delsol is less confident than Marion that Christendom can be replaced by a benign form of *laïcité*, in part because she is generally skeptical that any society can in fact be secular. Secularity is a fantasy indulged in by intellectuals, but for ordinary people, "for whom common sense

whispers that there are mysteries behind the door," religion of some sort is unavoidable. Our present moment, she argues, is not one of secularization but of revolution "in the strict sense of a cyclical return." Ancient paganism is reborn, albeit in new forms marked by the sixteen intervening centuries of Christendom. This revolution involves a kind of Nietzschean transvaluation both in morals (what she calls "the normative inversion") and in worldview ("the ontological inversion"). Delsol tries to retain a certain analytic detachment in describing these inversions of prior moral norms, casting herself as an observer of this moment of historical transition rather than as a partisan. Still, she insists on the significance of this inversion. She believes that the mores of a society form the basic architecture of its existence, a structure more stable than codified laws, shaping not only the actions of those who belong to it but also their feelings and habits. As any parent will recognize (Delsol is the mother of six), "children are always educated by their times more than by their parents."

To shed light on our own times, Delsol looks back to the birth of Christendom, the last great inversion of norms in the West. She insists on two claims that might seem contradictory at first: the advent of Christendom was a radical break with the pagan past, and it was also unthinkable without that past as the basis on which it built. Christians constructed their civilization using elements of pagan culture, in particular Stoic morality, though now "democratized" and reframed within a new system of beliefs that transformed what was appropriated. Like Marion, Delsol sees "otherness" as a key to the innovation of Christianity. In contrast to the profoundly unified religious world of the Romans, in which the gods and humanity were fellow citizens of the cosmos, Christianity "introduced a dualism between the temporal and the spiritual, the here-and-now and the beyond, human beings and God." The advent of Christendom brought a sharp reversal of societal attitudes regarding divorce, abortion, infanticide, suicide, and homosexuality. Delsol evinces a keen sympathy for those pagan Romans, conservators of traditional values, who felt that with the advent of Christendom they had entered "an intellectual and spiritual world torn apart," and she shows genuine admiration for those who continued to battle in the face of what was clearly inevitable defeat.

So too in our own day the partisans of Christendom fight in service of what is manifestly a lost cause. Delsol points to shifts in both laws and popular attitudes toward divorce, abortion, and assisted reproduction. Though there are pockets of resistance to these developments (particularly, she notes, in the United States), the path of this arc is clear: "Humanitarianism, the morality of today, is a morality entirely oriented toward the well-being of the individual, without any vision of the human person [*vision anthropologique*]." What we see is an "inversion of the inversion," an undoing of the revolution of the fourth century that turned the ideals of Christianity into socially enforced norms. Some would say that this is the result of our progressive realization of the inviolability of individual conscience with regard to ultimate questions, but Delsol resists narratives of progress: "In each era, 'progress' consists simply in reconciling realities (laws, customs, mores) with diffuse and sometimes as yet unexpressed beliefs that evolve in silence."

This suggests that human beings are not simply behavers, but also believers. The moral norms of the ancient world changed because the beliefs of Christianity supplanted those of paganism, making long-accepted pagan practices suddenly appear odious. Delsol quotes Tacitus: "[Christians] hold profane all that we hold as sacred and, on the other hand, permit all that we hold to be abominable." Like Marion, Delsol ascribes to Judaism and Christianity a key role in de-sacralizing the world. The dualism of Christianity, with its transcendent God standing over and against the world He created, replaced the "cosmotheism" of antiquity, which saw the cosmos itself as saturated with divinity. Or, more precisely, monotheism was layered on top of cosmotheism, a "secondary religion" covering over (but just barely) the "primary religion" of humanity, which "arises, so to speak, on its own, proliferates without fertilizer, and instantly occupies and reoccupies a place as soon as it is free." This reoccupation of the space vacated by Christendom is what we face today. Christianity has been replaced not by atheism and secularity, as the Enlightenment *philosophes* foretold, but by a religion "more primitive and more rustic."

Today this primitive and rustic cosmotheism takes various forms, perhaps most powerfully in the emergence of environmentalism as a kind of popular religion. Nietzsche was right in pointing to the "otherworldliness" of Christianity as a repudiation of the ancient world, and the contemporary repudiation of Christendom is fueled by a desire to focus again on this world as our true home. "For the monotheist, this world is only a temporary lodging. For the cosmotheist it is a dwelling. The postmodern spirit is tired of living in a lodging.… It wants to be reintegrated into the world as a full citizen, and not as a 'resident alien.'"

Delsol notes the numerous writers who have described modernity as parasitic on Christianity, but she prefers to speak of modernity as a "palimpsest" written over the Christian text, just as Christianity was written over the text of antiquity. This is always the way that human societies work: "Using all the possible materials" from the past "but depriving them of their meaning in order to reinvent them for the benefit of a new epoch." Just as Christendom replaced paganism, a religion founded on mythos, with one that claimed to be founded on truth—and persecuted those who denied that truth—so now, in our postmodern moment, "truth" has once again been eclipsed by mythos. Yet this new mythos is ineradicably marked by the Christian appeal to "truth," for it does not breed tolerance, as the myths of antiquity did, but retains the universalism of the Christendom that it has overwritten. For Delsol, the "woke" have "taken over the concept of dogmatic truth, and excluded their adversaries from public life, just as

the Church had excommunicated in times past." The fate of the West is neither nihilism nor ancient pagan religion, but humanitarianism, "the evangelical virtues…recycled to become a kind of common morality." But, Delsol asks, "what will become of principles that can no longer permanently replenish themselves, their source having been banished?" We are left with what Delsol calls, invoking Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, "the Church without Christ," and one suspects that Delsol would agree with O'Connor in *A Memoir of Mary Ann* that, in the absence of faith, "we govern by…a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror."

Blame for this outcome can be laid at the feet of Christendom itself: "In its pretention to establish itself as a civilization, Christianity ended up producing a monstrous avatar that is at the same time its alter-ego and its mortal enemy." But, Delsol reminds us, Christendom is not Christianity, and the demise of the former is not the demise of the latter. She is inclined to cast a jaundiced eye at excessive Christian breast-beating over the past, "which can resemble masochism." We rightly judge aspects of Christendom to have been distortions of the Gospel, but Delsol, the good historicist, sees little point in condemning those in the past who did not have the benefit of our hindsight. Delsol comes neither to praise nor to condemn Christendom, but to bury it.

Chantal Delsol

She is concerned, however, that in their reasonable fear of repeating the errors of Christendom, Christians will end up muting their distinctive voice. Late in the book, she shifts from the descriptive to the prescriptive: "To dialogue is not to dissolve oneself in the theses of the adversary, and one does not need to cease to exist in order to be tolerant—in fact, the opposite is the case." This is not the integralist call for a return to Christendom. It is, as Delsol puts it, a call to "a spiritual revolution," which by worldly standards might look like defeat. Christians must form their children "to carry themselves like Kierkegaard's knight of faith: resigned, but also able to walk toward the infinite." For Delsol, as for Marion, the category of "witness" is key. Christians without Christendom must take up the role of witnesses rather than rulers, and learn the virtues characteristic of a minority: "Equanimity, patience, and perseverance." Christians must take as their model not Sepúlveda, who justified the conversion by conquest of the Americas, but the martyred Trappist monks of Tibhirine, who died because they would not abandon their Muslim neighbors.

There are clear points of convergence between Marion and Delsol. They both reject integralism and seek a practical *modus vivendi* within the current socio-political order. Neither thinks that the Kingship of Christ requires Christians to have their hands on the levers of temporal power. And neither wishes to embrace a progressivism that would dilute Christian witness into a vague spirituality. Marion in particular is resolutely Christo-centric in his approach: "In order to understand Catholics, it is first necessary to figure out what makes them tick: Christ." This is especially the case when it comes to determining the success or failure of the Church: "[Christ] never guaranteed it would become a majority, or dominant in the world: he only asked it to pass through the same experience of the cross by which he gained the Resurrection." It is through witness, not through coercion, that the Church engages the world and seeks to change it. Marion and Delsol are "conservative" primarily in the sense that they seek to conserve the centrality of Christ in the Church's witness, and to do this in continuity with the saints of the past.

But there are also important differences between the two. Delsol's tone is more combative than Marion's. This is partly a difference of intellectual style—between a philosopher-theologian who typically operates in a speculative and abstract mode and a philosopher-sociologist who mucks around in the messiness of history. But there is also a substantive difference. Marion still operates within Jacques Maritain's "New Christendom" model, in which the Church's public role is to provide the state with the values it needs to sustain what Maritain called "the democratic secular faith." That faith was, if not Christian, at least "Christianly inspired," and it formed a people that "at least recognized the value and sensibleness of the Christian conception of freedom, social progress, and the political establishment." Marion seems confident that "Christians furnish society with its best citizens from the point of view even of the interests of the city of men, because their disinterestedness toward earthly power makes them honest workers who are efficient and reliable in community life."

Delsol explicitly rejects Maritain's New Christendom model, calling it one of "the last illusions" of the postwar era. This is in keeping with her rejection of the idea that modernity is secular, even in Marion's benign sense of *laïcité*. Maritain and Marion's vision of the Church supplying the modern nation with something it lacks is at odds with Delsol's claim that contemporary society in fact possesses its own moral norms and belief system: neo-pagan cosmotheism. If she is right, then there are no gaps for Christian beliefs and values to fill; the space they would occupy is already filled with alternative beliefs and values. Marion's *A Brief Apology for a Catholic Moment* echoes the title of Richard John Neuhaus's 1987 book *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World*. Both of these books see the Church as serving a vital social role within a religiously neutral state. In light of this agreement, it is tempting to cast Delsol in the role of Neuhaus's friend Stanley Hauerwas, the contrarian insisting on the ineradicable conflict between Church and world, and suggesting that "Catholic moments" may simply be nostalgia for the halls of power. In fact, immediately after her criticism of Maritain, Delsol invokes Hauerwas's student, William Cavanaugh, as offering an alternative approach, one that focuses on the Church as what Pope Francis has called "a field hospital," present not to provide values to a secular world, but to bind up its wounds.

Jean-Luc Marion

Finally, we might note how Marion and Delsol address the topic that has been haunting the Church for the past two decades: the sex-abuse crisis. One would expect the counter-witness of this scandal to be of particular concern to thinkers who give primacy to "witness" as the Church's mode of engagement with the world. But Marion mentions pedophilia only in a brief footnote largely dedicated to pointing out the presence of pedophiles in other communities and organizations. To be fair, his book came out in France several years before the Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Church issued its scathing report on sexual abuse in the French Church. But something Marion *does* say makes one wonder if his silence on this issue is entirely accidental. At the outset of the book he notes, "Only the saints speak properly of God and are qualified to critique the Church and Catholics." He then goes on to write a few pages later that "the believer who is serious and practicing the faith *forgets* to occupy himself with the reform of ecclesiastical institutions." Marion is undoubtedly correct to warn Catholics away from an obsession with ecclesiastic politics and toward focusing on the heart of the Gospel. But this still leaves the question of how reform is possible in a Church with few saints and a hierarchy with a poor track record of policing itself. Over the past few decades, ordinary, non-saintly Catholics—and often, alas, ex-Catholics—played a key role in holding the Church accountable. An idealized ecclesiology that seems to ignore this fact is hardly adequate to our moment.

Delsol, unsurprisingly, has little tendency to idealize the Church. Though the Independent Commission's report had not yet been issued when she wrote her book, it was clearly on the horizon, and she does address the scandal in a few passages. She notes that pedophilia, now criminalized, had once been considered by the Church and society at large "a lesser evil that one bore in order to safeguard families and institutions." She repeats this point later, noting that what was seen as a relatively minor misstep at one point in time—"collateral damage"—became, at a later point in time, a crime against humanity. All of this fits with her historicist account of moral norms and her tendency, when writing in her analytic mode, of eschewing moral judgements on the past, which had its own very different norms.

But Delsol is also able to step out of that analytic mode and speak more normatively as a member of the Catholic faithful, and here her judgments are sharper. She sees the sex-abuse catastrophe as evidence of the distorting effects Christendom had on Christian faith. "The Church behaves like a governing and dominating institution, believing that everything that is forbidden to others is permitted for it." Powerful cultural institutions often convince themselves that, in light of their important societal role, they cannot afford the luxury of truth-telling. By the grace of providence and the vicissitudes of history, the Church, freed from Christendom, is now in a better position to witness to the truth, even if it is the truth of her own failures.

Both of these brief books are rich in resources for reflection. As the Church in the United States confronts the reality of accelerating disaffiliation among young people, the experience of the Church in France, which has long grappled with dechristianization, acquires greater relevance. Marion and Delsol help us see how Catholics in an increasingly post-Christian society might bear witness to their faith without bitterness or nostalgia—and perhaps even with joy.

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THE MADNESS OF KING CHARLES
Froissart

Spencer Hupp

When you get to thinking that you're glass,
And the leper tells you you're betrayed,
Know there's good air on the river Oise
And beds for you and both your kids.

The wife who's managed this far seems
All the warmer and brings no mail. One hour
It rains. You take the green way down to daydream
And hike up your cartoon-tartan sweater.

When the sun blazes down, after rain,
The honeybees don't buzz, but, rather, ring.
You'll have them tamed
In a far country when no one knows you're king

Where horses fatten—crab apples and corn—
And phones light up to name your favorite song.
The flatscreens should have known but never learned.
They wall you in this fortress of your wrong.

A flag falls in the dusk, in air,
Whipped to tatters, extravagant and grim.
Your silent son is everywhere.
It's he who shatters, that you loved him.

SPENCER HUPP *is a poet and critic from Little Rock, Arkansas. His poems, essays, and reviews appear in the* Sewanee Review, Raritan, *the* Los Angeles Review of Books, Literary Matters, *the* New Criterion, *the* Honest Ulsterman, Mantis, Cortland Review, *and the* Times Literary Supplement, *among others. Hupp was most recently named a semifinalist in the 2021 92Y Discovery Contest. He currently serves as an MFA candidate and graduate instructor in the Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins University.*

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ALEJANDRO ANREUS

Buried No Longer

'Nuestra Casa: Rediscovering the Treasures of the Hispanic Society & Library'

The first time I visited the Hispanic Society Museum and Library was in the late 1970s. I was an art student interested in the paintings of Joaquín Sorolla, and the museum was the only place to see his pictures in the New York area. I encountered a Beaux-Arts building with marvelous works, a couple of guards, and no other visitors. The place felt completely disconnected from its neighborhood in Washington Heights, where it sat prominently at the intersection of 155th Street and Broadway.

This was not my experience during a recent visit earlier this spring. This time, I was there to see *Nuestra Casa*, an exhibition of selected works from the permanent collection organized by guest curator Madeleine Haddon. The newly renovated East Gallery was bustling with visitors. Founded in 1904 by Hispanophile Archer Milton Huntington (1870–1955), the Hispanic Society boasts a collection of more than 750,000 objects representing the art, literature, and history of Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking cultures throughout the world.

The institution was the first, during the early decades of the twentieth century, to introduce the work of important Spanish painters (such as Sorolla and Ignacio Zuloaga) to American audiences. By the 1960s, however, the Hispanic Society had lost touch with its surrounding Latino/a community (mostly from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico). That changed in the 1990s, when the museum began to expand its Latin American collections. Since then, it has been making a serious effort to connect with and serve its local communities, in part by integrating a revised, more critical art history into its exhibitions—one that questions hierarchies and presents the complex heritage of the cultures without ignoring the brutality of colonization and the slave trade. *Nuestra Casa* does just that, thoughtfully bringing together the museum's best-known works with less familiar (but no less extraordinary) canvases and artifacts.

The new East Gallery is a gray, open space featuring nineteen paintings and ten display cases holding books, fabrics, and other artifacts. There's plenty of room to examine each object closely, and on its own terms. Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of a Little Girl* (1640) hangs next to José Agustín Arrieta's *The Young Man from the Coast* (ca. 1843–1850), a juxtaposition that sets the tone for the entire exhibition. Without a doubt Spain's greatest Baroque painter, Velázquez depicts a dark-haired little girl in this small, unfinished canvas. Her solemn and beautiful face is rendered with freshness, simplicity, and economy. (Scholars suggest she may have been the artist's granddaughter, but her identity remains a mystery.) The corresponding portrait by Arrieta represents a young man of African descent from the coastal region of Veracruz in Arrieta's native Mexico. Dressed in a white shirt and overalls, he holds a basket of tropical fruits from the region—a perfect excuse for the artist to introduce bright colors and variegated forms. The young man looks straight at the viewer with a slight smile on his lips, as he offers us mango, mamey, pineapple, and other produce. He's a dignified person, worthy of our respect.

In and around the cases are objects that reflect multicultural, pre-1492 Spain. There's a beautiful porcelain tile with a Star of David from a Toledo synagogue and an exquisite Alhambra silk from Granada. An iron door knocker featuring the head of an African man from the sixteenth century reminds us of the horror of slavery and reveals the racist parallels that Spanish artisans and consumers frequently made between Africans and animals, other common subjects for this type of object. A group of six watercolors by the Afro-Peruvian artist Pancho Fierro (1807–1879) offers charming examples of genre subjects, from bullfighting to a water seller to indigenous and Afro-Hispanic women. In addition to portraits, Fierro painted murals and shop signs; but it's in his watercolors and prints that he most forcefully conveys the vivacity of Lima's diverse inhabitants.

Opposite: Francisco Goya, *The Duchess of Alba*, 1797

REALY EASY STAR / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

The duchess stands in front of a river at her estate and points to the ground, where "Solo Goya" (Only Goya) appears written in the sand.

The show doesn't shy away from direct engagement with colonialism. Case in point: the work of Puerto Rico's leading colonial painter, the *mestizo* José Campeche (1751–1809), who skillfully adapted the Spanish Rococo style for the Americas. His small, jewel-like portrait of *Doña María Catalina de Urrutia* is filled with delicate details capturing her dress, hat, and jewels. Similarly, Mexican Juan Rodríguez Juárez's casta painting *Mestizo and Indian Produce Coyote* (c. 1715) depicts a family and classifies the racial mixtures prevalent there—the child's animal name, Coyote, says it all. But it's not so simple. Paradoxically, works like this both controlled and regulated images of race in the New World, documenting the existence of interracial unions acceptable in Latin America, but not in Spain.

There's also a large number of standout paintings, including canvases by Sorolla, Francisco Goya, Santiago Rusiñol, Ramón Casas, Hermen Anglada Camarasa, and Miguel Viladrich Vilá. One of Goya's major portraits (and one of the jewels of the collection) is *The Duchess of Alba* (1797). Dressed in the popular style of a *maja* (a working-class woman from Madrid), the duchess wears a black lace-trimmed skirt and an embroidered yellow blouse; her grandfather's red military scarf is tied around her waist while a transparent black mantilla covers her head and shoulders. She stands in front of a river at her estate and points to the ground, where "*Solo Goya*" (Only Goya) appears written in the sand. Here Goya fuses painterly elegance with an earthy sensuality; it is possible that the artist could have had an affair with his subject, but we will never know. At the time the duchess was mourning her dead husband, and the two rings she wears—one inscribed "Alba," the other "Goya"—may simply reflect the artist's fantasy. Goya kept the portrait in his studio long after the sitter's death.

Both Santiago Rusiñol and Ramón Casas were leading Catalonian painters associated with the cultural golden age of Barcelona in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Dynamic draftsmen, their visual languages were grounded in realism, while absorbing both Tonalist and Impressionist elements. Rusiñol's *Calvario at Sagunto, Day's End*, is one of a series of landscapes of *calvarios* (religious places dedicated to the fourteen Stations of the Cross, for processions during Holy Week and throughout the year) that he started in 1901. Painted with fluid brushwork in whites, yellows, ochres, and olive green, this *calvario* is set on a hill overlooking a city north of Valencia. Rusiñol endows the building and surrounding cypress trees with a spiritual quality that evokes meditation. Casas's *La Santera* depicts a woman collecting alms in a dark church interior, apparently a beggar. Research and closer examination prove otherwise. Not only is the model the mother of a distinguished Barcelona ceramicist, but she is also well dressed and wears fine earrings and an antique brooch. A monumental figure, she glances straight at the viewer while holding a collection plate and a basket for food donations.

Sorolla's *After the Bath*, in contrast, is a painting filled with light and color. Here a fisherman holds up the bath sheet for a young woman who has come up from the surf. The painter's brush hints at the folds of her robe clinging to her body. An orchestration of blues, yellows, and pinks fills the surface of the canvas as sunlight cascades over both figures. Nearby, Anglada Camarasa's *Girls of Burriana* represents three young women and their highly bedecked horse awaiting the beginning of a procession that celebrates spring and commemorates St. Joseph (a Valencian tradition that takes place in March). Thickly painted with a decorative quality, it exudes joy through its dense application of colors, reflecting the influence of Art Nouveau and the Austrian painter Gustav Klimt.

My visit concluded with a long look at two magnificent 1920s portraits, *The Woman from Montevideo* and *The Man from Montevideo,* both by Miguel Viladrich Vilá (1887–1956). Though a native Catalonian, he moved to South America by 1919 and spent the rest of his life traveling between Argentina and Uruguay. Painted with a sharpness and precision that evoke Renaissance works as well as the contemporary German New Objectivity, his work depicts Afro-Uruguayans. The woman sits sideways against a bright purple wall inside a room; through an open window we see a sunny courtyard, two other buildings, and a bit of sky. The composition is rich with detail: a potted plant; a dish with cauliflower, oranges, and apples; a blanket of multihued, geometric patterns that the woman grips with her left hand. In her right hand she holds a gourd with a straw, presumably filled with yerba mate. Calm and powerful, wearing a light-colored blouse that contrasts with her dark skirt, she stares out almost in defiance. Viladrich's slightly smaller pendant portrait of a man places him outdoors against a landscape of greens and gray-brown trees. Looking sideways off in the distance, his face is charged with melancholy. He wears a red poncho, and carefully holds a small, white dog at his side. Little is known of the sitters of these two portraits; yet Viladrich has captured the individual character of their persons through the clarity of the drawing, richness of color, and specificity of place.

Nuestra Casa—which means "our house"—is indeed a "rediscovery" of treasures that reflect the rich and complicated cultures of Spain and Latin America. This specific presentation, which concludes in mid-April, doesn't just leave us hungry for more. It portends a bright, increasingly relevant future for the Hispanic Society Museum and Library, whose masterpieces, one hopes, will soon be rediscovered by new generations.

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Joaquín Sorolla, *After the Bath*, 1908

ARTEFACT/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

CELIA PAUL

Seen as They Are

The unsentimental compassion of great portrait painting

Celia Paul is one of England's leading painters, best known for her intimate portraits of herself and her family members. Paul has felt a lifelong kinship with the Welsh artist Gwen John (1876–1939), with whom she shares biographical parallels as well as a fierce sense of artistic independence. The following selection is excerpted from Paul's new book, Letters to Gwen John, *a series of imagined letters to John, punctuated by Paul's reflections on her own work and life, including her husband's diagnosis of cancer and the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is reprinted with permission from New York Review Books.*

Gwen was commissioned by the nuns in the convent near where she was living in Meudon to paint a portrait of their foundress, known as Mère Poussepin. They gave her a small prayer card with an engraving of Mère Poussepin's image on it. The foundress is represented as an old woman with a long nose and a kind smile. Inspired by the image of the old woman with the long nose, Gwen begins a series of 'nun' paintings, the first one of which most closely resembles the face on the prayer card. But in Gwen's painting, she uses a young woman as a model for the Mother Superior: the only concession to a likeness is that she elongates her young woman's nose and gives her a benevolent smile. Old age is never Gwen John's subject matter. I wonder if it is because her mother died young, when she was still a child, and she remembered her as a youthful woman? She never paints an aging self-portrait. In her later years she makes several studies of a subject that she titles simply *Old Woman*. But she is interested in the way the slab of the old woman's white headscarf contrasts with the narrow black line of material that trims the collar of her dress. She is not interested in recording the wrinkling of her skin, or even how the old woman must feel as she approaches her final years: there is no psychological empathy.

When Gwen was at the Slade [School of Fine Art at University College, London] she painted a portrait of the cleaning lady in the house she shared with her brother in Fitzroy Street. She dresses Mrs. Atkinson in a black cloak and a black hat that resembles a collapsed chimney pot. She gives the old woman's eyes a far-away expression: this and a sheep's skull on the shelf above the fireplace (a childish trophy brought back from a walk in the Pembrokeshire countryside during the holidays) are the only indications that Gwen is attempting to understand the pathos of old age. What really interests her are the tawny and rust-red patterns of the wallpaper behind her head and the black fireplace, which resembles the fireplace that Lucian [Freud] would later use as a backdrop to an early nude that he painted of Gwen's niece, Zoe Hicks—[British painter] Augustus [John]'s daughter by a South American model named Chiquita. Rodin made a sculpture that he titled *Celle qui fut la belle heaulmière*, which translates as 'She who was the beautiful helmet-maker' (or, more likely, 'helmet-maker's wife'). Her skinny arm is thrust behind her back and her tired dugs drip down like tallow grease onto her withered thighs as she sits, doubled-up with rheumatism; her head, on its scrawny neck, is lowered and her eyes in their hollow sockets are staring at the ground. I once asked Lucian why he never painted naked portraits of old women. He replied that it wasn't his subject matter, but maybe it was mine. I have thought about this advice.

Opposite:
Mère Poussepin Seated at a Table, (oil on canvas), Gwen John (1876-1939)

NATIONAL MUSEUM WALES/NATIONAL MUSEUMS & GALLERIES OF WALES/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Rembrandt depicts himself in old age as he is—the squashy nose and sagging jowls—but it is clear that he accepts himself, that he loves himself. He doesn't flinch from the truth, yet he doesn't falsify his appearance with exaggerated cruelty or self-pity.

There is a painting by the artist Alice Neel of herself, naked in old age. There is no sentimentality in this depiction of herself, no strained emotions. She sees herself as she is. All her work has this quality of acceptance. It is what makes her art uniquely uplifting. There is no overblown romanticism. She sees people—herself included—as they are.

I would like to do the same. I would like to see things as they are without the rose-tint of yearning through which I look at my outer and inner worlds. How did Alice Neel acquire this clarity of vision? If I too possessed this matter-of-fact clear-sightedness, would I lose some vital part of myself? Would my work become ordinary? I would like to try, nevertheless. Self-knowledge leads to self-acceptance. Rembrandt depicts himself in old age as he is—the squashy nose and sagging jowls—but it is clear that he accepts himself, that he loves himself. He doesn't flinch from the truth, yet he doesn't falsify his appearance with exaggerated cruelty or self-pity. An artist should love herself, if she is to be true. Once, when I was battling with self-hatred while trying to do a self-portrait, I had the idea of copying one of my favorite portraits by Frans Hals: *Portrait of a Woman*, in the Ferens Art Gallery in Hull. The woman's face expresses a transcendent goodness and kindness. I placed my copy of the Hals portrait on an easel adjacent to the easel that supported my miserable attempt at self-depiction, so that Hals's woman would look kindly upon me. My painting grew more compassionate as a result, and my self-portrait less falsely severe.

'Flesh,' aging or young, is almost impossible to depict impartially. Lucian's and Rodin's main subject is 'flesh.' Despite the power of their realism, the emotion is sometimes overblown and theatrical. Rodin's Catholicism infuses his nudes with an upward strain: they are anguished or post-coitally inspired. Lucian was born in Berlin during the Weimar Republic. His art bears traces of the influence of Otto Dix and George Grosz. Even though this movement, named *Neue Sachlichkeit* ("New Objectivity"), aims to shun the romanticism of the previous era, Dix and Grosz's abstinence is tainted by a romantic warp.

Old age has always been my subject matter. When I was at the Slade, before I started making portraits of my mother, I painted an old woman who was a resident at the old people's home near where we lived in Hull, where my father had been appointed bishop after leaving Lee Abbey. She was called Mrs. Brown.

Mrs. Brown was a small bird-like woman with huge, dark eyes that seemed to take up most of the space in her diminutive face. They often filled with tears as she was sitting for me. She sat very still. One day the tears spilled out and flowed down her cheeks. She told me that she was thinking of her cherished grandson, who had killed himself quite recently. She had doted on this boy, and all her fondest memories were of the time she spent with him when he was a child. But he had grown up to be an awkward and troubled adolescent. Mrs. Brown and I became friends and she came to tea at the bishop's house. Mrs. Mawson was on the waiting list for the old people's home. I visited her in her one-bedroom house, which smelled of damp and urine. I set up my easel in her cramped sitting room. Despite her shabby surroundings, she had a quiet dignity. There was something innocent and childlike about her. We hardly spoke. Her husband had died a few years previously and she was unused to talking. She sat in her armchair and gazed past me with an expression of gentle resignation.

I often think of those old women whom I have painted, my mother included, and I wonder at their quiet patience, and what inner reserves of strength they must draw on to keep up their courage and power to endure, riven as they all must be by memories and fear of the approaching dark.

THE PLUNGE

Michael Cadnum

Beside the Pacific there is a giant room
and in this room is a huge pool—
saltwater straight from the ocean
and we call it the Plunge,
unheated and housed right beside the actual surf.

This is the month inside the month,
the week within the week like the lungs in the body.
Even the air over this water is made of
water and salt, the first soil. The glow through
the windows breaks into a strip of light beside
another strip of light and as I walk through this completeness,
this world that does not need me,
I splash wet footprints on concrete colder than feeling.
Dropping softly I am not soft at all—I make a splash,

a wide circle outward from where I cling to steps green
with the life that was the first morning, the plankton
finding itself in the deep end shaped like a day,
a span from before a single bird to later, when
only the sound of traffic makes it seem there was
anything at all. Another

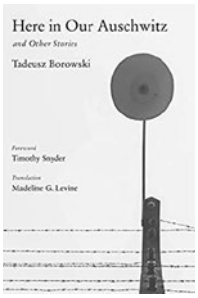
human figure walks the haze, breaking through the hubbub not
a sound but haphazard illumination, a reflection upward from
what I have broken, and shatter again every moment,
the healing, fragmenting chill that absorbs
each new visitor into sunlight.

MICHAEL CADNUM *has published nearly forty books. His new collection of poems,* The Promised Rain, *is in private circulation. He lives in Albany, California.*

The Only Way to Stand It

COSTICĂ BRĂDĂȚAN

On the evening of July 1, 1951, a twenty-eight-year-old writer turned on the gas in his Warsaw apartment, took an overdose of barbiturates, and lay down to sleep. This was his third suicide attempt, and the one that would eventually succeed: he died in hospital two days later. His life had been brief, but more eventful than most. He had spent over two years in Nazi concentration camps (at Auschwitz, Dautmergen, and Dachau-Allach), and not only did he live to tell the tale, but his accounts made history. They shaped the way subsequent generations would see and talk about the camps. That the chronicler of life in the proximity of gas chambers chose to gas himself to death was bound to be read as a meaningful gesture; his suicide would be related to what psychologists call "secondary guilt syndrome," and discussed along with the suicides of other camp survivors, such as Primo Levy and Jean Améry. The case of Tadeusz Borowski (1922–1951), however, is more complicated.



HERE IN OUR AUSCHWITZ AND OTHER STORIES

TADEUSZ BOROWSKI
TRANS. BY MADELINE G. LEVINE
Yale University Press
$28 | 392 pp.

In fact, as *Here in Our Auschwitz and Other Stories* testifies, nothing was simple with Borowski. Both the historian Timothy Snyder, who wrote the foreword, and the translator Madeline G. Levine, who also wrote the introduction, do an excellent job of recreating the complex context—political, social, cultural, and intellectual—in which Borowski wrote and lived and died. And so does Czeslaw Miłosz in *The Captive Mind* (1953), where Borowski features, memorably, as "Beta." Miłosz's portrait of Borowski is as insightful as it is haunting. When they first met in 1942, Miłosz realized that he had "a real poet" in front of him. He was also struck by Borowski's curious "mixture of arrogance and humility." Writes Miłosz: "In conversation he seemed inwardly convinced of his own

Children, adults, and elderly Jews undergoing the selection process on the Birkenau arrival platform

FROM "THE AUSCHWITZ ALBUM," COURTESY OF YAD VASHEM/USHMM

superiority; he attacked ferociously yet retreated immediately, bashfully hiding his claws." This highly explosive mixture not only defined Borowski's life but may also have had something to do with the manner of his death.

If any one thing defines the twentieth century politically, it must be the emergence of the totalitarian state: born almost fully grown, like an ancient goddess, exquisitely equipped and frighteningly efficient. And nothing captures the essence of totalitarianism better than the concentration camp. In this respect, as in others, Borowski was the child of his century: camps are everywhere in his life and writing. Concentration camps were "a kind of family regularity," observes Snyder in the foreword. Long before their son was interned in Hitler's camps, Borowski's parents spent a combined ten years in Stalin's. Even before Borowski experienced the camps personally, his poetry tended to see the whole world as an immense labor camp, in which we slave ourselves to death without relief or discernible purpose. To come into this world only to find yourself a camp inmate must have appeared to him a farce of cosmic proportions: "There will remain after us only scrap-iron and the hollow, jeering laughter of generations."

Borowski's Auschwitz stories are told, with disturbing directness, in the first person. The narrator—who both is and is *not* Borowski himself—makes a point of coming across as a cynical observer of camp existence. This cynicism proves an excellent narrative device: it allows him to see everything with detachment, impartiality, and even a sense of humor. One thing that strikes the reader of these stories is, odd as it may sound, their hilarity: there are jokes and witticisms and good cheer scattered everywhere. Nothing escapes the narrator's biting humor, not even death—especially not death. At one point he finds himself "humming a popular tune called 'The Crematory Tango.'" In the opening story, "Here in Our Auschwitz," the narrator, along with other inmates, tongue firmly in cheek, takes pride in the place:

> You people over there in your Birkenau don't have the faintest notion what miracles of culture take place here, just a couple of kilometers from the chimneys. Picture it: they're playing the overture to *Tancred* and something by Berlioz, and also some Finnish dances by a composer who has a lot of a's in his name.

Borowski's gallows humor is more than a laughing matter. It is a way of coping with the unspeakable—a survival strategy. His narrator spells it out: "Here in our Auschwitz we have to amuse ourselves as best we can. You think there's another way to stand this?" When you find yourself cast in a cosmic farce, the only way to remain on your feet is to come up with a counter-laughter, and outlaugh the farceur. In a meaningless world, this may be the only way to find and hang onto some meaning. The narrator is keen to have the last laugh, even as the farce reaches its most damning depths.

"I have read many books about concentration camps," Miłosz writes of Borowski's account of his Auschwitz experience, "but not one of them is as terrifying as his stories because he never moralizes, he relates." Borowski made his debut in 1942 as a poet, but after Auschwitz he found himself incapable of using poetry to convey the experience. Perhaps it seemed to him obscene to use hexameters to describe gas chambers, or to try to find a rhyme for "Zyklon." Without metaphors or embellishment, and with the devastating precision of a born journalist, Borowski captures the camp experience in all its naked brutality.

In real life, the inmate Borowski cared for others, helped them when he could, showed sympathy and solidarity. But the world we see through his narrator's eyes is devoid of any such feelings; here humanity is in perpetual war with itself, ready to do anything to survive. In "A Day at Harmenze," an inmate named Beker distinguishes philosophically between mere hunger and "real hunger," and volunteers a definition of the latter: "Hunger is real when one person looks at another as something to be eaten. I have already experienced such hunger." This is the world Borowski tasked himself to describe and make intelligible.

As a Pole, Borowski's narrator (like Borowski himself) was not meant for the gas chamber but for "auxiliary" work in the medical facilities, in construction, or in railway maintenance. That put him in a good position to observe the workings of the extermination factory. One day, along with other auxiliaries, he plays soccer on an improvised field, right next to the chimney. He is a goalie. He notices the trains coming in, people being unloaded and taken away. He keeps playing until he realizes what has just happened: "Behind my back, between one corner kick and the next, they had gassed three thousand people." This is typical Borowski: pure, uninflected observation. No emotion interferes with the recording. And it's this maddening impassivity that makes him such an excellent recording device. The death of three thousand people is not scandalous or dramatic. It is, in Borowski's account, *banal* and *casual*, and that makes it all the more unsettling. *Here in Our Auschwitz and Other Stories* is a haunting, visceral, profoundly disturbing text. If reading it makes you feel sick, that's precisely what Borowski wants.

When the narrator does allow himself to make an observation or draw a conclusion, he maintains the same steadiness of hand and iciness of voice: "Look at what an original world we are living in: how few people there are in Europe who have not killed a man! And how few people there are whom other people would not wish to murder!" At times his philosophical detachment allows him to contemplate a future world from which he is completely absent, but at whose construction he contributed with his pain. Borowski gives us a glimpse into a world where Hitler *has won*:

> What will the world know about us if the Nazis are victorious? Gigantic edifices will arise, highways, factories, towering monu-

When Borowski returned from the camps, he must have thought he had left the absurd behind. Now he found he had carried it with him into postwar Poland.

> ments. Our hands will be placed beneath every brick, the railroad ties and concrete slabs will be carried on our backs. They will slaughter our families, the sick, the old. They will slaughter the children.
>
> And no one will know about us. The poets, lawyers, philosophers, priests will drown our voices. They will create beauty, goodness, and truth. They will create religion.

In "The People Who Were Walking," the narrator works on the roof of one of the camp's buildings. Thanks to his position there, he can see the whole clockwork process of extermination:

> From the roofs there was a clear view of the burning pyres and the working crematoriums. A crowd would go inside, undress, then the SS men would quickly shut the windows, screwing them down tight. After a couple of minutes, not enough to coat a sheet of tar paper properly, they would open the windows and side doors and air the place out. The Sonderkommando would arrive and drag the corpses onto the pyre. And so it went from morning to night, beginning anew every day.

We have read so much about the Holocaust that our understanding of it has become somewhat blunted. We know so many details about the camps that we no longer grasp what a scene like this really means—we fail to see its enormity. Humans had always killed other humans; they had done so cruelly and savagely, but also clumsily, with deficient tools, poor organization, and high rates of failure. For all the perseverance of the past mass murderers, and despite their best efforts, some of their intended victims would always manage to escape. As this scene reveals, however, by the middle of the twentieth century we had made a science of mass murder and could finally destroy each other on a truly industrial scale, aided by a flawless bureaucracy. Once you were caught up in the extermination machine, the chances of escape were close to nil. That was considered progress, of a kind. Indeed, there was a sense in which the war itself, and the Holocaust that accompanied it, was an extension of the Enlightenment ambition of technical mastery. "Never in human history has a stronger hope existed in man," observes the narrator, but "also never has it caused so much evil as in this war, and that is why we are perishing in the gas." So much knowledge, so painfully gained, long centuries of scientific and technological progress—all of it at the service of barbarism.

When Borowski published his Auschwitz stories after the war, they were an instant classic. Almost overnight, he became the conscience of his generation. His accounts attracted a wide readership. It also attracted the attention of the Polish Communist Party, which was then cooking up its own brand of totalitarianism. Much as they liked Borowski's anti-Nazi stories, they had serious reservations about his ideological pedigree. Borowski would take some handling, but eventually he fell in line. The newly installed Communist regime dealt with him in classic carrot-and-stick fashion: in 1949 they denounced him as "a decadent cosmopolitan beholden to Western literature," and at the same time offered him a well-paid position as an apparatchik. The trick worked: Borowski went for the carrot. Remember the dangerous "mixture of arrogance and humility" that so impressed Miłosz when he met Borowski? In no time at all, Borowski was posted to Berlin as a press officer with the Polish embassy. His work there brought together journalism and espionage, with a strong flavor of political opportunism.

For good measure, Borowski issued stern self-criticism, denouncing his Auschwitz stories for giving unintentional support to fascism: "I wasn't able to parse the camp in class terms; even as I experienced the camp, I did not really know what I was experiencing.... I had the ambition of showing the truth, but I ended up in an objective alliance with fascist ideology." When Borowski returned from the camps, he must have thought he had left the absurd behind. Now he found he had carried it with him into postwar Poland. Apparently the absurd was wherever Borowski was.

Miłosz met Borowski for the last time in 1950. "The bashful poet had become a thorough *homo politicus*," a "well-known propagandist," and a hack writer. "Every week," recalls Miłosz, "one of his malignant articles appeared in a government weekly." By now, Borowski was no different from the narrator of his Auschwitz stories: opportunistic, cynical, ready to do anything to survive. But, ironically, he didn't. Borowski may have become an opportunist, but he was no fool. He couldn't help noticing, for example, that even as the regime was pouring favors on him, it started arresting and torturing his closest friends. When he tried to intervene, the regime ignored him. He must have realized that he was now in bed with thugs, and that awareness gradually poisoned him. No wonder that, as he was approaching his end, Borowski became obsessed with the suicide of Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930), another poet who sang so much praise to the Communist regime that he eventually drowned in it.

Borowski was buried in a Warsaw military cemetery, with state honors and much fanfare. A band played "The Internationale." The farce was now complete, and the last laughter was not his.

COSTICĂ BRĂDĂȚAN *is a professor of humanities at Texas Tech University, and an honorary research professor of philosophy at University of Queensland, in Australia. He is the author, most recently, of* Dying for Ideas: The Dangerous Lives of the Philosophers *(Bloomsbury, paperback, 2018) and* In Praise of Failure *(forthcoming with Harvard University Press).*

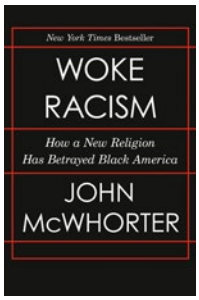
Half the Story

CLIFFORD THOMPSON

A Black Lives Matter protest in Berlin, Germany, 2020

SYBILLE REUTER/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

America is a strange place these days. It is difficult to recall another time when two diametrically opposed groups, the progressive and the reactionary, were both ascendant at once—when one group of people reached quite such heights of hypervigilance over supposedly offensive language while another worked so determinedly to dismantle basic rights. In one universe, a white person is shamed for being so presumptuous as to "agree" with the ideas of the Black Lives Matter movement; in another, a key provision of the 1965 Voting Rights Act—one of the pillars of racial equality under the law—is struck down, and a mob, misled by the loser of a presidential election, attempts to reverse the results of the democratic process. Meanwhile, social critics decry the excesses of whichever camp offends them more, conveniently ignoring any facts that might blur their arguments (and interfere with their book sales). One unfortunate result of such either/or-ism is the way it compromises the credibility of important and necessary voices.



WOKE RACISM
How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America

JOHN MCWHORTER
Portfolio
$28 | 201 pp.

Take the case of John McWhorter. An associate professor at Columbia University and the author of over twenty books, McWhorter, who is African American, is not only a star in the world of linguistics but also an outspoken critic of what he often rightly perceives as fuzzy and dangerous thinking on the subject of race, a frequent focus of the *New York Times* op-ed columns he began writing in 2021. In his most recent book, *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America*, McWhorter, as the book's subtitle suggests, declares the current strain of political correctness and "wokism" to be not *like* a religion but to be an *actual* religion. McWhorter, an atheist, does not mean this as a compliment. By religion he means a set of pronouncements that are antithetical to logic and goals that are unattainable in the world in which we actually live. To demonstrate this anti-logic, he sets up a chart juxtaposing various "woke" beliefs that directly contradict one another. The statement "If you're white and date only white people, you're a racist" is set opposite "If you're white and date a black person, you are, if only deep down, exotifying an 'other.'" Next to the statement "Silence about racism is violence" is "Elevate the voices of the oppressed over your own." Logic, McWhorter notes, is not the point for the woke faithful: "Beyond a certain point, one is not to think one's way through a *dogma* in logical fashion, from A to Z, and decide whether it makes sense. At a certain point you are to suspend logic and have faith." As for those unattainable goals, the woke seek a world in which every last vestige of racism has been wiped from the minds of the populace. The fact that this will never come to pass, McWhorter explains, is exactly

Where is the book that condemns the excesses of the woke while acknowledging the very real nature of the forces that wokism is meant to combat?

the point. Referring to the champions of wokism as "the Elect," he writes,

> To these people, actual progress on race is not something to celebrate but to talk around. This is because, with progress, the Elect lose their sense of purpose. Note: What they are after is not money or power, but sheer purpose, in the basic sense of feeling like you matter and that your life has a meaningful agenda.

What makes wokism dangerous rather than simply irritating, McWhorter asserts, is that it can and does lead to real-world harm. A competent, respected university official who sends one ill-considered tweet, then apologizes, is nonetheless out of a job, a victim of unforgiving zealotry. A reluctance to discipline Black students out of fear of appearing biased, *even when the students are misbehaving*, allows classrooms to be disrupted, with the price ultimately paid by other Black students—the very people wokism is ostensibly meant to help. Like much that McWhorter writes, his assertions here mix eloquence with simple common sense.

Unfortunately, he does not stop there.

A frequent target of McWhorter's book is the writer Ta-Nehisi Coates, whose 2015 memoir-treatise, *Between the World and Me*, established his reputation as arguably the nation's most prominent—and certainly its hippest—thinker on the subject of race. Among other things, McWhorter accuses Coates of being willfully pessimistic, of ignoring positive developments in favor of arguments that all work their way around to the same unsurprising conclusion: that racism is king in America. "Hot on the heels of Biden's inauguration," McWhorter notes,

> Ta-Nehisi Coates published an article titled "Donald Trump Is Out. Are We Ready to Talk About How He Got In?".... Never mind the notion that no one had been ready to "talk about" something that was actually mulled over utterly, thoroughly, and unceasingly for the entire four years Trump was in office. More to the point: Why, exactly, do race issues mean that startling developments in the present are less worthy of real discussion than gloomy history lessons? The reason we supposedly "really need to be talking about" 2016 over 2020 is because 2020 was good news, but 2016 was Good News in the Christian meaning of the term—as in, a message about racism lingering and in need of battling. Good News is gooder than good—i.e., real—news.

McWhorter gets no argument from this corner.

But what is interesting about McWhorter's targeting of Coates is that the two men sometimes take the same flawed approach—one that involves resisting complexity—in making very different points. In *Between the World and Me*, Coates considers white racism every way but Sunday while dismissing the very real problem of Black-on-Black homicide with this breezy passage: "To yell black-on-black crime is to shoot a man and then shame him for bleeding." McWhorter does his own version of this. Like his hero Shelby Steele, author of the best-selling 1990 book *The Content of Our Character*, McWhorter sensibly believes that, yes, racism is a fact of life and probably always will be; that we must fight racism when we encounter it; but that to make victim status the centerpiece of our identities hampers our progress and leaves us unable to enjoy the progress we do make. But in stressing that last point, McWhorter plays down the nature of the fight. Referring to the events of January 6, 2021, when a mob goaded by Donald Trump stormed the U.S. Capitol, bent on stopping the peaceful transfer of power, McWhorter writes, "The Capitol mob are changing nothing.... That they tried to threaten democracy is less important than that their attempt failed." They did not try to threaten democracy; they did threaten democracy. And yes, their attempt failed—*this time*. The Capitol riots constitute the loudest alarm bells of my lifetime (which began two years before McWhorter's) about the dangerous mix of misinformation and xenophobia at work in America. A poll taken in 2021 found that over half of Republicans believe the 2020 presidential election was "stolen," and people who hold such views are like roaches: for every one you see (as at the Capitol riots), there are many, many more you don't.

McWhorter's downplaying of the fight appears to extend backward in time as well. "Segregation," he writes, was "outlawed from on high, with black Americans not having had to endure the long, slow clawing our way into self-sufficiency regardless of prevailing attitudes that other groups had dealt with." He adds that the civil-rights movement "was about changing rules, and in a way, this was less useful in fostering true, gut-level, no-questions-asked pride. We [Blacks] could not say that we clawed our way to where we got despite whites just staying the way they were." That is simply a distortion of history. Someone who knew no better might interpret such passages to mean that the U.S. government, with no prodding, decided out of the goodness of its heart to make racial equality the law of the land, that Black people facing down police dogs and fire hoses was somehow unrelated to a "long, slow clawing."

Where is the book that condemns the excesses of the woke while acknowledging the very real nature of the forces that wokism is meant to combat? Where is the book that calls for us to rail against intolerance without being intolerant ourselves? Where is the book that does not avoid complexity as antithetical to its arguments but embraces it as a necessary condition of understanding what is going on? Maybe, one of these days, McWhorter and Coates will team up to write it. Unlikely, maybe—but hey, a fellow can dream.

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

Entering the Chaos

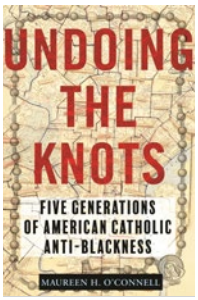
EMMA MCDONALD

Maureen O'Connell's new book, *Undoing the Knots: Five Generations of American Catholic Anti-Blackness*, is a project of unraveling. To frame her task, she cites James Baldwin's "advice to white people" to "go back where you started, as far back as you can, examine all of it, travel your road again and tell the truth about it." Over the course of the book, O'Connell retraces her family's history in the United States, specifically in Catholic Philadelphia, to uncover how her family's identity as Irish immigrant Catholics became entangled with whiteness and anti-Blackness over the course of centuries, such that her own Catholic identity remains knotted up with racism today.

O'Connell's examination of her ancestors' and relatives' experiences in the United States as white Catholics—as well as her own—leads her to two revelations that extend beyond her family's history. The first: whiteness is "part of the tradition of American Catholicism." In other words, what it means to be white and what it means to be Catholic are handed down together from one generation to the next through ritual, practice, and teaching, and American Catholic traditions and rituals can become lessons in learning and performing whiteness.

Maureen O'Connell

DAN NGUYEN



UNDOING THE KNOTS
Five Generations of American Catholic Anti-Blackness

MAUREEN H. O'CONNELL
Beacon Press
$28.95 | 272 pp.

Identifying as white helped newly arrived Irish Catholics confront anti-Catholic sentiment in the United States. Rather than stand in solidarity with African Americans, who also lived under an Anglo-Saxon culture that was not their own, Irish Catholics "tapped into the rootstock of American anti-Blackness to build immunity to the pathogen of anti-Catholicism." In the twentieth century, for example, Irish Catholics used minstrel shows to create a racial boundary between themselves and Black Americans. In her research, O'Connell discovers that both her mother and her uncle participated in a Catholic blackface minstrel show, a form of entertainment that was "standard fare" for Irish Catholic families into the 1950s. The practice of blackface minstrelsy cultivated a twisted version of solidarity, connecting white people with each other via shared ridicule of Black people. It is these kinds of traditions that O'Connell wants to scrutinize so that white Catholics can recognize how Catholic traditions and practices have been used to communicate and pass down the myth of Black inferiority.

O'Connell also emphasizes that the decisions of Church leaders shaped how white Catholics thought about race and racism. At every turn, Catholic leaders missed opportunities to subvert the racial hierarchies that oppressed Black people in the United States. Instead of requiring "confederate Catholics to atone for the sin of slavery" or suggesting other measures of reckoning honestly with the trauma of slavery and the

White Catholics siloed in their own parishes did not see people of color depicted in religious art, worshiping alongside them in the pews, or serving as clergy, which subtly communicated the myth that Black people "were somehow less like the Divine and maybe even less human."

Civil War, U.S. bishops exercised what O'Connell terms "a preferential option for the institutional Church." They prioritized converting Black people "rather than reconstructing conditions that continued to oppress their bodies," and they continued to focus on defending against Protestant discrimination and promoting doctrinal orthodoxy rather than opposing oppression.

Instead of resisting racial divisions, the bishops reinforced them, drawing parish lines to separate Catholics by race. Here, O'Connell demonstrates how the factors that structure where people live, work, and worship—not only parish membership, but also zoning laws, hiring practices, and school policies—affect who people see in their daily lives. Their relative isolation from Black people profoundly influenced white Catholics' imagination, cultivating "a sense that their experience was normative and therefore uncontestable." White Catholics siloed in their own parishes did not see people of color depicted in religious art, worshiping alongside them in the pews, or serving as clergy, which subtly communicated the myth that Black people "were somehow less like the Divine and maybe even less human." This helped reinforce the idea that white Catholics were more deserving of ecclesial resources than Black Catholics. Without encounters across racial lines, white Catholic assumptions "about God, themselves, or other people" remained unchallenged.

O'Connell's second revelation offers some hope to the reader: traditions are constantly evolving. Although Catholicism and anti-Blackness remain entangled, O'Connell believes that connection can be unwound. The first step in the process of "undoing the knots" is truth-telling. White Catholics must lay aside our tacit beliefs about white superiority and our images of white-only saints, stop downplaying our advantages, and instead recognize the sinister aspects of Catholic history and identity in the United States.

In dwelling on her family's participation in Catholic anti-Blackness, O'Connell models what it would look like for white Catholics to become "more truthful storytellers about ourselves and our traditions." For her, a willingness to encounter painful pasts and to recognize our own ancestors as perpetrators of anti-Blackness is a form of witness. Being a witness means sharing knowledge of what we have encountered and offering others the chance to encounter transformative perspectives and radical ideas. O'Connell is honest about the pain and discomfort she experiences in discovering her own relatives' biases and blind spots, as well as their participation in gentrification and the exploitation of Black people. But by mourning the past, she introduces the virtue that she hopes, if put into practice, can transform how white Catholics confront racism: racial mercy. Drawing on the work of Jesuit moral theologian James Keenan, O'Connell defines racial mercy as "a willingness to enter into the chaos of racism." She asks white Catholics to dwell in the discomfort of Catholic entanglement with anti-Blackness. As we confront the shame and guilt that emerge when we look at our own involvement in racism, we need God's mercy to acknowledge our shortcomings and seek forgiveness before we can meaningfully participate in the work of racial justice.

O'Connell's vision of racial mercy encourages us to think on the level of systems and structures. Examining her own family history preserves the role of individuals as agents within these systems and structures, but her analysis of racial boundaries in parishes, neighborhoods, and communities directs our focus to transforming how our communities are structured, funded, and supported. O'Connell concludes, "If our government and our Church—at their respective national, state, and local levels—worked in tandem to create and enforce policies and practices that segregated metro areas like Philadelphia, then they are also capable of working together to repair some of that damage by enacting policies and practices that reintegrate those neighborhoods." As parishes and schools close, merge, and restructure, we have the opportunity to reshape the boundaries of Catholicism to enact solidarity across racial lines.

But the power to make structural decisions remains largely with the Church hierarchy. Even as Pope Francis encourages lay participation in the process of synodality, the kind of structural change O'Connell calls for requires Church leaders to begin "undoing the knots." Instead of asserting that "the Church has been antiracist from the beginning" and labeling Black Lives Matter as a Marxist "pseudo-religion," the U.S. bishops should listen to the voices of Catholics willing to tell the truth about the Church's involvement with racism. As the National Black Sisters' Conference reminded Archbishop Gomez, "Over four hundred years of slavery, trauma, pain, disenfranchisement, and brutal violence have been a part of the fabric of this nation and the American Catholic Church." Without transformative change, the Church will continue to be caught up in anti-Blackness.

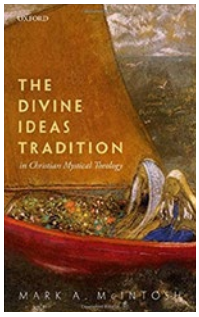
EMMA MCDONALD *is a doctoral candidate in theological ethics at Boston College.*

Our True Identity

ROBERT P. IMBELLI

Mark McIntosh, who died in October 2021 of ALS at the age of sixty-one, was an Episcopal priest and a remarkable theologian. He held the inaugural professorship in Christian Spirituality at Loyola University Chicago. I never met McIntosh, but, as a reader of his work on Christian mystical theology, I have long felt a personal kinship with him.

McIntosh received his PhD from the University of Chicago, where he studied under David Tracy and Bernard McGinn (both well known to *Commonweal* readers), and wrote his doctoral dissertation on Hans Urs von Balthasar. Among his writings, three deserve special mention. *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* shows the continuing influence of von Balthasar, but also the emergence of McIntosh's own distinctive voice. *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge* explores the theological foundations of spiritual discernment and the transformative exigencies entailed by its truthful practice. *Mysteries of Faith*, addressed to a non-specialized audience, is a gem of direct communication rich in theological and spiritual insight.



THE DIVINE IDEAS TRADITION IN CHRISTIAN MYSTICAL THEOLOGY

MARK A. MCINTOSH
Oxford University Press
$85 | 240 pp.

The topic of his last book, *The Divine Ideas*, might appear to be more recondite, yet it was written while the author contended with growing physical paralysis and with an acute sense of the global threats posed by climate disruption, the pandemic, and misinformation. For McIntosh, immersion in the theological tradition concerning the "divine ideas" was not merely an academic exercise, but a matter of burning actuality.

Mystical theology as McIntosh understands it is not a branch or sub-division of theology, but rather a way of doing theology that keeps the inseparable connection of theology and spirituality front and center. It presents the mysteries of the faith as realities

Mark A. McIntosh

ANNE MCINTOSH

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into which we are invited to enter rather than just ideas we are able to entertain. For this reason, prayer and liturgy are part of the practice of mystical theology. In the words of the fourth-century mystical theologian Evagrius Ponticus: the one who is a theologian prays and the one who prays is a theologian. Mystical theology is therefore not the investigation of extraordinary physical and psychic phenomena, but the cultivation, in mature Christian life, of a contemplative consciousness of the enlivening presence of God.

In *The Divine Ideas*, McIntosh marshals an array of Christian thinkers—from Origen and Augustine, through Maximus the Confessor and John Scotus Eriugena, to Aquinas and Bonaventure—who engaged with and transformed the Platonic philosophical tradition. For Platonists, the divine ideas constitute the permanent formal structures governing reality, of which the physical universe is only a derivative and passing reflection. Ideas, such as that of the Good and of Justice, are the ultimate measure of their shadowy earthly instantiations. Christian theologians, impelled by divine revelation, transformed this Platonic conception in two ways. Inspired by the doctrine of the Trinity, they viewed the Ideas not as subsistent realities, but as intrinsic to divine knowing itself. Indeed, the very generation of the Word from the Father includes the archetypal "ideas" of all that God will create. "All things were made through the Word, and without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:3). And because "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14), the physical universe and bodily reality assume a unique dignity and luster. Rather than being depreciated as pale imitations of a far nobler reality, they became sacramental signifiers of an eternal truth and beauty. Here is how McIntosh recapitulates the Trinitarian and Christological revolution these theologians accomplished.

> The divine ideas teaching holds that the ideas of all creatures exist within the one eternal Idea that God has of Godself, namely within the eternal Word of God—and, conversely, that the one eternal Word who speaks the truth of every creature exists immanently within all creatures.... This means also that the incarnate Word, Jesus of Nazareth, bears within himself the deep truth of every creature.

This is the complex fundamental theme that this book develops in a series of variations. McIntosh holds that the divine-ideas tradition generates a "contemplative momentum." The same thing could be said of his book, which explores ever more ample vistas. Let me sketch a few of these.

First, the book—and the tradition it retrieves—has a profound sense of the ongoing agency of the Blessed Trinity. It affirms not a deistic Supreme Being who withdraws into Olympian isolation, but the Triune God who creates *now*, forever speaking a life-giving Word and breathing forth the Spirit upon a beloved creation.

Second, a Christological grammar governs the Christian appropriation of the divine-ideas teaching. The teaching is employed to elucidate the striking New Testament confession that Christ is "the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation" and that "in him all things hold together" (Col 1:15, 17). McIntosh writes that "God in Christ acts to restore the creation precisely by reuniting creatures with the knowledge of their true identity as it has always been known and loved in the eternal Word." In Christ the transcendent dignity of every human being stands revealed. He or she is a concrete expression of God's love, with a unique value and a distinct calling.

Third, the material creation exhibits "a real depth of intelligibility" as the fruit of God's knowing and loving. Creation's very being is sacramental. A richness of meaning lies embodied in the "ordinary." "Charged with the grandeur of God," creatures, both animate and inanimate, cry out, in Gerard Manley Hopkins's words, "What I do is me: for that I came." McIntosh writes that for the divine-ideas tradition "the whole creation exists as a continuous event of communication and indeed communion—whose source is the eternal self-communication of the Trinity and whose goal is the fulfillment of creatures as they come more perfectly to share in this divine communion."

The perfected embodiment of this divine communication and communion is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The "first-born of all creation" becomes the "first-born from the dead" (Colossians 1:18), bringing creation home to its source. Here, as in his other books, McIntosh shows a deep sense of the human plight and of our need for redemption. The divine ideas are luminous guides and goals, but they also bring into relief the illusions and addictions that are roadblocks to wisdom. Made for glory, we too often settle for fool's gold.

The death from which Christ saves us is far more than physical death. It is the very corroding of God's image in us through fantasies of self-aggrandizement and hatred. These distortions of the generative divine ideas wreak havoc not only on individuals, but also on the whole human community and the rest of material creation. Sin falsifies divine communication and erects obstacles to the communion God desires. At its

deepest, sin is refusal of Incarnation. For, in a sentence from Maximus the Confessor that McIntosh relishes, "the Word always and in all things desires to realize the mystery of his embodiment."

With the resurrection of Christ, God's life-giving Word stands fully revealed. Christians are those whose converted consciousness perceives the fulfillment of God's plan in the risen Christ and whose conduct seeks to further the restoration of all things in him. Immersed in Christ's paschal mystery in baptism and nourished by the Eucharist, Christians are led "into a new communion with the divine ideas…a new perception of all reality from within the eternal divine knowing and loving of all things." Moreover, the divine-ideas tradition fosters the realization of the interconnectedness of all created reality. Every life is constitutively relational, each imaging to every other its Triune Creator.

Significantly, McIntosh entitles the last chapter of his book "Beatitude and the Goodness of Truth." There he struggles to give some expression to belief in "the life of the world to come." And, once more, his reflections are not notional, but deeply, even poignantly, personal. In his preface, he frankly confesses, "As my physical incapacities became more challenging, I often wondered about the truth of my own life and how that truth might be grounded in a deeper reality." And at the end of his exploration of the divine-ideas tradition, he returns to the question: "What is the divine meaning inherent in our earthly struggle to fulfill the personal calling and gifts that comprise our embodied existence—especially in light of the fact that we know ourselves to be mortal, that all we have loved and sought to achieve will need to be surrendered." With the help of that tradition he ventures a response. "The self-sharing and self-communication through which we become who we are with others are meant to be life-giving and gracious moments of fulfillment, expressing in time the eternal self-sharing generosity of the Trinity within which our exemplar truth exists imperishably." Thus, beyond the failures, the prideful refusals of communication and spurning of communion, our hope lies in "the Incarnation and Paschal mystery of the eternal Word [who] reconnects each creature with its truth in the Word and makes possible, through the self-giving love of Jesus Christ, the consummating self-donation of the creatures to each other and ultimately to God."

As one immersed in the writings of mystical theologians from Evagrius to Merton, McIntosh wrestles in his works with the imperative to exorcise the false ego and put on the true self renewed in Christ. His book *Discernment and Truth* is, at heart, a study of the liberation of the ego from its illusions and addictions to the truth and freedom of the children of God. What the present work offers is the further insight that our true Christic self is already present in God's providential design for each of us in the Word that the Father utters from all eternity.

One might say that McIntosh has written, in this parting gift, an extended commentary upon Paul's exclamation, "For those whom God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that the Son might be first-born among many brothers and sisters" (Romans 8:29). This is the beatitude for which McIntosh longs: "As creatures are enabled in Christ to fulfill the relational nature of their identities, they are made whole again with God's knowing and loving of their truth, their divine ideas; and this means that they are made one within the eternal event of God's knowing of God-self in the Word, and in this way come to share in the beatitude within which the Father knows all things in the Son within the eternal joy of the Holy Spirit." May Mark McIntosh now know fully the one who has known and chosen him, and us, "before the foundation of the world."

ROBERT P. IMBELLI, *a priest of the Archdiocese of New York, is the author of* Rekindling the Christic Imagination.

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A BOUGH FALLS

Gary Stein

Cut loose, betrayed by air it lands
like a lost gift on silent
indifferent earth until found

by a man of faith in an afterlife,
perhaps a priest in his black cassock
who later in a lonely rectory marries

imperfect oak to bundled kindling.
His match, a splinter of grace,
sparks petals of persistent light

into bloom and spreads healing
heat while wood whispers
like an angel in the quiet night.

Isn't fire just another prayer offered
to cure the darkness in time?
But every clock winds down

and wood turns to ash, and air
in the chimney chokes
on its smoke. The priest believes

that only when a soul is freed
from its body, like vapor
from the charred log, will it rise.

GARY STEIN's Touring the Shadow Factory *won the Brick Road Poetry Press annual competition in 2017. His chapbook,* Between Worlds *(Finishing Line, 2014), was a contest finalist. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in journals such as* Poetry, Prairie Schooner, Poet Lore, Folio, Penn Review, *the* Atlanta Review, *and the* Asheville Poetry Review. *He holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, co-edited* Cabin Fever *(The Word Works, 2004), and has taught creative writing in high schools and colleges.*

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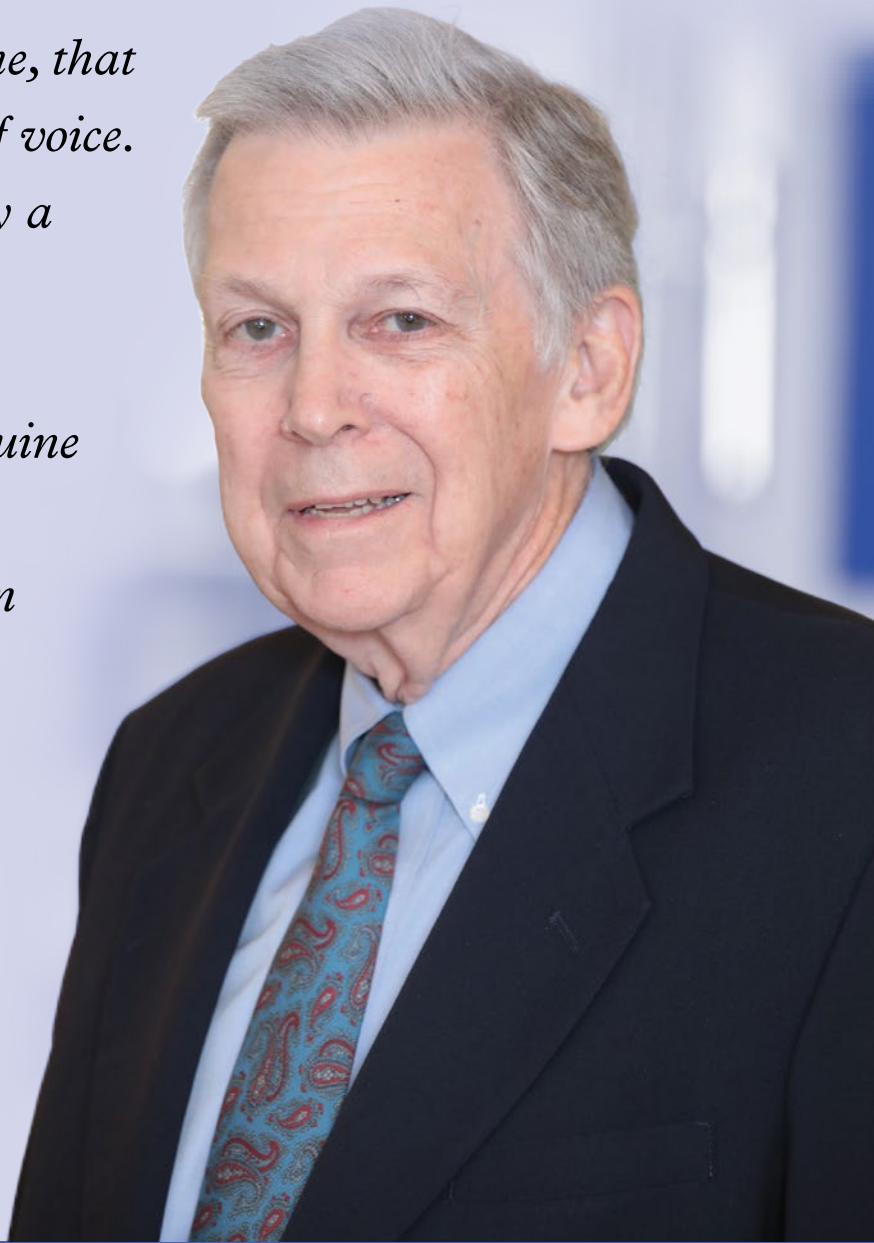
— DAN MURTAUGH
Co-Chair, the Edward Skillin Society



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The Sorrowful & the Glorious

SHARON MESMER

Seeing the name of one of my childhood bullies, Sandy, on the return address of the FedEx box surprised me. Why would she send me anything?

I was picked on constantly as a kid. By seventh grade I was ninety pounds and 5'10". In 1972, thin was definitely not "in" at St. John of God Grammar School on Chicago's working-class South Side. Add to that my mother's Polish antidote for colds: no washing my hair in winter because I'd "catch a draft." Every day I walked from 8 a.m. Mass to my homeroom accompanied by a steady stream of mean-girl name-calling: "greaseball," "titless," and the un-Christ-like "palsy." It became a contest to see who could trip me first. When I invited one bully over after school (because I secretly hoped my mom's powdered-sugar waffles would make her like me), she ridiculed the four-room apartment my family and I lived in above my grandmother's.

"You ain't even got a shower," she jeered the next morning. "Just an old Polack bathtub—with feet."

That really hurt because my great-grandfather had built our two-flat after he arrived in Chicago from Poznań in 1908. Once when I was little, my mother saw me playing on my bedroom floor and said, "*Dziadziuś* put those boards in himself." He died before I was born, but I could feel his spirit in the swirl of dust glimmering like diamonds in the light from the window. I felt safe there.

There was another place I felt safe: my parish church. St. John of God was Eastern-European ornate, with paintings of gently smiling angels and saints covering the walls. No kid ever made fun of me there; talking during Mass meant punishment by ever-vigilant nuns scanning for infractions. Whenever I felt raw from taunts, I pictured myself in a pew on a summer day, light beaming down from the stained-glass windows. During Mass I stared at the statue of St. John of God in his alcove on the main altar, and instead of praying for the souls in Purgatory, I asked him to make me famous, like my idol, Janis Joplin. She'd been bullied, too; her high-school classmates had scrawled "pig" on her locker. I had no talent, but I vowed that someday I would, like Janis, go to my class reunion and make my bullies feel like failures.

Life after grammar school was a reprieve—except there was Sandy. She brought the name-calling to high school, though thankfully it never caught on because her old gang had dispersed. Still, she'd sidle down the hall toward me, a lithe, smirking sylph, and look me up and down and laugh as I passed. By that point, revenge through fame—although for what, I still didn't know—was my main motivation. It carried me through high school to college, where I traded the Janis fantasy for something even more unrealistic: becoming a poet. In 1988 I moved to New York to attend an MFA program. I

The altar at St. John of God Church in Chicago during its demolition in 2011

NOAH VAUGHN/FLICKR

wasn't on a fast-track to literary stardom, but I was getting published, traveling internationally to give readings, making a living teaching writing. Didn't the poet George Herbert say, "Living well is the best revenge"?

In 2011, I got a friend request on Facebook from a former neighbor in Chicago, who told me St. John of God Church was being demolished. I was horrified and deeply grieved. Through many moves I'd carried artifacts of my sanctuary with me: a box of incense for the Feast of Epiphany, a small envelope of rose petals that had been touched to a Virgin Mary statue that supposedly cried real tears. There was a parish Facebook group where people were discussing old times. I knew my former bullies would be there, but I joined anyway, for one last look.

There my old tormentors were, including Sandy. No longer a snickering pixie, she looked hesitant, diminished, as if life had whittled her down. She had posted photos she took of the half-bulldozed church: a mural of the Holy Family with nothing but blue sky behind it, and the main altar, divested of everything, towering above a rubble-strewn floor. The St. John statue was gone. Great-grandpa had done carpentry work for the church, but nothing he'd built remained. From Sandy's comments on the photos, I could tell she was grief-stricken. I'd thought I was the only one who loved that place. I was wrong.

After I posted a greeting in the group, friend requests and messages appeared:

"Sharon, I remember when your Nicholas Copernicus poem won an award in that Polish contest."

"Are you still writing? You were so talented."

Did none of them recall what they did? In spite of myself, I felt nostalgic.

A month later, someone organized a reunion. There was no Pulitzer in my future, but maybe I could flaunt my travels. Most of those women had never left Chicago. I decided to go.

As I walked into the bar area of the restaurant, Sandy and three former mean girls rushed toward me. I readied myself to say something eloquently sarcastic. Then one of them, Linda, thrust my first poetry collection at me. "I ordered this off Amazon," she said. "Will you sign it? You know, I visited the East Coast once."

I waited for a pause in Linda's breathless story about her trip to New York to begin my fierce narrative, but then she interrupted herself: "Hey, remember the 'Living Rosary'?"

I did, vividly. Every year, on an evening during the first week of May, the entire grammar school walked in procession from the schoolyard to the church, led by priests carrying a statue of the Virgin Mary adorned with roses. The entire neighborhood thronged the streets, singing, taking pictures. Inside the church, we kids lined up one behind another in the aisles as an eighth-grade girl in a white dress lit the candles we were holding. As each flared, the congregation said a "Hail Mary."

"And when all the candles were lit," Linda said, "they'd turn off the lights, and—"

"And *we* were the Living Rosary," I laughed.

As I joined in the memory-sharing (and wondered whether I had Stockholm Syndrome), it occurred to me that we really were a living rosary. We'd shared countless childhood hours in that church, that school. And hadn't the nuns told us that even though Jesus was murdered by his bullies, he forgave them? In Matthew, when Jesus teaches the crowd the Lord's Prayer during the Sermon on the Mount, he goes on to highlight one single aspect of the prayer: "If you forgive those who have stumbled and gone astray, then your heavenly father will forgive you."

My long-held hurt suddenly became an array of conflicting emotions. I had no idea what these women's lives were like now—or then. They probably had their own tormentors; bullies have often been bullied. But I created a good life for myself. I'd gotten my "revenge."

I said nothing.

After the reunion, I sent Sandy a Facebook message to ask if I could call her; I wanted to know how it felt to visit our deconstructed church. She said yes. I was right there with her as she described looking through tears at the rubble and half-smashed murals, remembering pews filled with squirming children and the altar decorated for Christmas. When she told me she'd pilfered a cement brick and an old missalette covered in plaster dust, I laughed—I would've done that. We texted each other photos of our dresser-top altars, which looked very similar, right down to the box of incense for Epiphany and the envelope of petals touched to the crying Virgin Mary statue. We hung up promising to stay in closer touch.

Still, I had no idea why an old, beautifully carved wooden cupboard door slid out of that FedEx box she'd sent. It had a sweet, musty scent I couldn't place.

"Our classmate Don," her note said, "gave me this because he was moving, but I already salvaged one. Didn't you say a relative built stuff for the church? It's a cupboard door from the priests' sacristy. You can still smell the incense!"

Standing in my Brooklyn kitchen, holding an object that was, like myself, far removed from its source in time and place, I understood that this was Sandy's apology: a door to past and future. It was important that I forgive her and all my former torturers because they were repositories of my childhood, living rosaries of shared, idiosyncratic memories. And didn't the rosary include the sorrowful mysteries as well as the joyful and glorious? Our Catholic upbringing taught us there was a divinely ordained place for suffering. It was the language Jesus used to communicate his humanity. If we could learn to understand it, it had value.

I couldn't be certain if that cupboard door was the work of my great-grandfather, but I was sure Sandy had given back to me something I thought I'd lost.

SHARON MESMER *is the author of the poetry collection* Greetings From My Girlie Leisure Place *(Bloof Books, 2015). She teaches creative writing at NYU and the New School.*

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