Religion, Politics, Culture

Commonweal

SEPTEMBER 2023

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LETTERS

Addressing the priest shortage and countering consumerism

A CONCRETE PATH FORWARD

A thoughtful, well-timed article always smacks of a near miracle. And with growing bewilderment in many circles around the perennial question "What ails us?," writer Regina Munch's herculean diagnosis provides enough tangible ideas to generate broad civic renewal—if we can just stop looking for cheap sales ("The Case against Consolidation," June 2023).

Clearly, strenuous hand-wringing or, God help us, insisting on the return of an incensed autocrat can do nothing to reverse many intentional policy decisions over decades—especially ones emphasizing low-cost consumer goods, leading us toward a dystopian future: a land of disempowered workers with little time or interest in social justice, community, or the search for meaning.

More than half a century ago, astute social critic and author James Baldwin remarked, "It is terrible to watch people cling to their captivity and insist on their own destruction." In essential ways, Munch's piece seems a concrete response to Baldwin's painful insight; it suggests humane, intelligent ways forward, which, though hard, can be pursued with all deliberate speed.

R. Jay Allain
Orleans, Mass.

A FOURTH WIN

I was pleased to read Dr. Metz's article, "A Win-Win-Win" (July/August 2023), on parish administrators. Might I hope for a fourth "win"?

As Dr. Metz describes it, the experience of parish administrators occurs when a parish does not have a priest-pastor. I feel the Church would also be well served if many parishes, particularly larger ones and merged parishes, had administrators or executive directors even when there is a priest as pastor. Metz notes that there are priests who are glad not to manage staff and sit through parish finance-committee meetings. Such priests should welcome a parish administrator working with them. Priests would have more time for pastoral and sacramental duties, which, frankly, in many cases they are failing at. Yes, there are pastors different from the ones Dr. Metz described—the ones who have recruited lay volunteers only to make communion calls to the homebound and hospitalized so the pastor can keep a tight, secretive grip on parish finances. Or the priest in Wisconsin, where I had difficulty for several days getting him to return my phone call to arrange my mother's funeral. These are the ones who really need a parish administrator brought in.

Additionally, such a program would create a cadre of experienced lay and diaconal parish administrators who can be hired by parishes without resident priest-pastors. As Metz wrote, currently these administrators seem to be brought in on short notice when there is a sudden vacancy in the pastorate and sometimes have little practical training or experience.

Kurt Vorndran
Washington D.C.

THE LIMITS OF THE LAITY

Thanks to Jon Metz for his description of how lay parish directors can help remedy the priest shortage. During my eighteen years as president of Aquinas Institute in St. Louis, we prepared dozens of lay parish directors. I saw their gifts with seniors, young children, adolescents, and married couples. They had insights and a sensitivity to pastoral needs that I did not possess. They are a great blessing to the Church.

Unfortunately, they are limited in what they can do. They cannot preach at Mass, they cannot hear confessions, and they cannot anoint. They can only marry and baptize in extreme circumstances. Important as they are, they will not be enough.

As a sacramental Church, we need more ordained ministers, deacons, and

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LETTERS

priests. We already have married priests whom we accepted from other denominations, but if you were born Catholic you don't qualify. This is a scandal. If we invited younger married men (and women) to prepare for ordination, we would have a flood of applications.

They would need at least three years of full-time preparation and enough financial support to replace lost wages. This would be expensive, but cost was never a factor in the past when we were preparing celibate candidates. There is no reason it should be now.

Charlie Bouchard, OP
St. Louis, Mo.

BUILDING AND SUSTAINING COMMUNITY

As a fairly observant Jew who is active at my synagogue in Bloomington, Indiana, I was instructed and moved by Matthew Rose's very fine article on the civil religion of Robert Bellah in your July/August issue ("Serious Play"). Rose's exposition of Bellah's thought captures what Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others are trying to do in building and sustaining religious community in an overly individualistic and consumerist American society.

Thank you, Mr. Rose and *Commonweal.*

David Szonyi
Bloomington, Ind.

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The Cowardice Caucus

In a live, nationally televised address forty-nine years ago last month, Richard Nixon resigned from the presidency, telling the American people that he no longer had "a strong enough political base in the Congress" to survive Watergate and serve out his term. This past August, charges were brought against Donald Trump in both federal court and in Fulton County, Georgia, for his efforts to overturn the result of the 2020 presidential election. At rallies, on cable TV, and in social media, Trump has railed at the charges against him, repeated the falsehoods that led to them, mocked the prosecutors who brought them, and issued thinly veiled threats against judges and potential witnesses. He has taken advantage of free media publicity to rake in millions of dollars from small donors, much of which he is apparently using to pay his mounting legal bills. Nevertheless, Trump still has the backing of more than half of Republican primary voters. Not coincidentally, he enjoys what Nixon, who faced no criminal charges, did not: a solid base of support from Republicans in Congress.

That loyalty stems from cowardice, not shared conviction. Republican members of Congress support Trump because they're afraid of his supporters. Trump voters have long raged against Republicans deemed insufficiently dedicated to their cause, which now amounts to returning the former president to office and exacting revenge on his political enemies. Their devotion grows more cult-like by the day: a recent poll shows that they trust Trump to tell the truth more than they trust their family, friends, and religious leaders. Fear of the base had already scared GOP leaders like Sens. Mitch McConnell and Lindsey Graham into voting against removing Trump from office after his second impeachment, following the attack on the Capitol in 2021. They justified their actions then by pointing to the courts as the proper venue for trying any crimes the former president might have committed. Fear motivates them even more today. Though Trump currently faces criminal charges in four different jurisdictions, Republican lawmakers criticize the same judicial process they earlier supported and slavishly echo right-wing nonsense about the "weaponized" Department of Justice. Now they say that voters in the 2024 election should issue the final verdict on his alleged crimes.

Trump's main primary challengers show even less backbone. The contortions that Ron DeSantis, Nikki Haley, and Tim Scott put themselves through to avoid criticizing the front-runner have prompted Chris Christie to suggest they might as well endorse Trump instead. Not that Christie deserves special credit: his fresh assessment of Trump as a dangerously unsuitable candidate comes seven years (and one previous endorsement of his own) too late. Whether Christie and the handful of other Republicans explicitly critical of Trump can affect the primaries, given the former president's lead among Republican voters, is doubtful. As the charges against Trump have piled up, his support among the base has only grown.

The opposite is true among the general electorate. Polling shows that the two most recent indictments have compounded public concerns about Trump's fitness for office. A majority of Americans say they would not support Trump in the election; 60 percent don't want him to run at all. "The broader public *hates* Donald Trump," writes Charles W. Cooke in the *National Review*. "The bringing of [these] charges has not caused them to like him more than they did before. The public's impression of him has worsened, rather than improved, over time." This may be music to the ears of Democrats and others who fear a second Trump presidency. But they shouldn't be complacent: President Biden still has strikingly low approval ratings, and it is likely that most Republican voters who don't support Trump in the primaries would vote for him against any Democrat in the general election.

And even if it seems that the legal cases against Trump are strong, nothing is guaranteed. Yes, special counsel Jack Smith and Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis were right to seek charges; in this nation, the law is supposed to apply equally to everyone, including former presidents. Indictments could also have deterrent value, perhaps discouraging future would-be plotters. And voters have a right to know beforehand whether a candidate in the coming election is guilty of trying to overturn the previous one. But the number, scope, and complexity of the cases will likely prevent them from going to trial as quickly as planned. Trump's lawyers are already trying to delay the process long enough for their client to return to office. Even if trials are held and convictions issued before the election, lengthy appeals would follow, likely pushing final rulings off beyond 2024.

It's been said before: we might not be here had Republican leaders taken advantage of the many opportunities they had to rid themselves of Trump when they could. Their failure to do so will bring further harm to their party if Trump is the nominee and loses in 2024. But it will have far more damaging consequences for the entire country should he somehow manage to win.

—August 24, 2023

A Patriarch Flees Baghdad

In a move that has sent shockwaves throughout Christian communities in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, Cardinal Louis Sako, Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, announced that he was leaving his headquarters in Baghdad and relocating to the city of Erbil, in the Kurdish-held region of Iraq. The announcement, which was posted on the Patriarchate's Arabic website on Saturday, July 15, came in the wake of the Iraqi government's abrupt withdrawal of official recognition of the patriarch five days earlier. A governmental decree issued in 2013 had previously recognized the patriarch's appointment by Rome as head of the Chaldean Catholic Church.

Iraqi Christian-rights activist Diya Butrus Slewa called this latest move by the government "a cynical political maneuver to seize the remainder of what Christians have left in Iraq and Baghdad and to expel them." Patriarch Sako gained international attention in 2021 when he hosted Pope Francis on his pastoral visit to Iraq.

The withdrawal of official recognition came as a result of pressure from a group known in Arabic as *Harakat Babilyun*, "the Babylonian Brigade," which claims to be a Christian militia but which recruits its members from radical Shiite communities in places like Baghdad's infamous Sadr City. The group's leader, Rayan al-Kildani, aims to control the strategic Nineveh region of the country. To that end, he is seeking control of the assets of the Chaldean Church, which Patriarch Sako oversees. The Brigade, which holds four seats in the Iraqi parliament, was sanctioned in 2019 by the U.S. Treasury Department for alleged human-rights abuses.

The standoff between the patriarch and the Brigade underscores the complex rivalries playing out among Christian warlords in places like Iraq and Lebanon. This is not the first time that such rivalries have resulted in a personal attack against a high-ranking church leader. In 1989, Lebanese Maronites, including the heads of several monastic orders, challenged the authority of then Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir for his opposition to General Michel Aoun, a popular Christian warlord and militia leader. Aoun's supporters broke into the patriarchal residence, forced the patriarch from his bed, and made him kiss a picture of Aoun. The following day, the patriarch moved to the safety of Syrian-held territory in northern Lebanon. The Vatican responded by dispatching Archbishop Pablo Puente, a heavy-hitter in Vatican diplomatic circles, who castigated the heads of Maronite religious orders for engaging in politics without permission from the Church's hierarchy. Despite the reprimand, Aoun's supporters catapulted him to the presidency of Lebanon in 2016. He was president on August 4, 2020, when 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate illegally stored at the port of Beirut exploded, gutting buildings, killing hundreds, and sinking the country even further into chaos.

The Iraqi government's unprecedented reversal has only enhanced Patriarch Sako's considerable symbolic authority among Iraqi Christian denominations. A coalition of Iraq's Chaldean, Syriac, and Assyrian churches has issued a joint statement deploring what it calls a land-grab in the ancestral Christian region of the Nineveh Plain by the Iraqi government. The group claims that this land is now being sold to individuals who are not from the region and who are not Christian.

Upon his arrival in Erbil, Patriarch Sako was welcomed by members of the Kurdish government as well as by Muslim religious officials. The patriarch thanked all present before noting, "Religious symbols are respected in the Kurdistan Region. The evidence is this warm welcome and respect." His remarks signaled a clear challenge to the Iraqi government's official position regarding the legal status of religious minorities.

— Joseph Amar

Climate Victory in Montana

Home to some of the largest and most beloved national parks in the country, Montana is known for its natural beauty and access to the outdoors. So it comes as no surprise that its 1972 State Constitutional Delegation drafted language guaranteeing a "clean and healthful" environment for current and future residents, adopting "the strongest preventative and anticipatory constitutional environmental provisions possible."

Now, those future residents, represented by sixteen plaintiffs aged five to twenty-two, are holding the state to its word, supported by the August 14 ruling of District Court judge Kathy Seeley in *Held v. State of Montana*. The case concerns a provision of the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) known as the "MEPA Limitation," which expressly forbids Montana agencies from considering greenhouse-gas emissions and their effect on the climate in environmental reviews. The reviews are part of the permitting process for fossil-fuel energy projects including coal mines, gas plants, pipelines, refineries, and industrial facilities. Judge Seeley's decision methodically presents the scientific consensus connecting emissions from those projects with climate change, and climate change with adverse health effects for Montana's youth.

Each of the plaintiffs cited concrete harms they suffered as a direct result of climate change. These included forced relocation due to wildfires and respiratory conditions like asthma triggered by smoke inhalation. But they also included less obvious effects. There were, for example, the Indigenous sisters who, because of changes in rainfall and tem-

perature, can no longer reliably find and harvest chokecherries for the traditional summer festival centered on the fruit. Then there was the competitive Nordic skier whose training opportunities are limited by melting snowpack. In addition to the plaintiffs' personal stories, a parade of expert witnesses provided credible and informative testimony on climate science and renewable energy. (Meanwhile, the testimony of the defense's only expert witness was, in the judge's words, "not well-supported, contained errors, and was not given weight by the Court.")

The transition away from fossil fuels in Montana would also be economically beneficial for state residents, who would see significant reductions in their energy costs. Lifting the MEPA Limitation is the first step, but it doesn't guarantee the implementation of any proactive measures toward renewable energy. Montana's Republican legislative supermajority has consistently ignored environmental recommendations, and the court can't compel it to heed them. Still, *Held* sets an important precedent. Several other state constitutions include so-called "green amendments" that form the basis of ongoing lawsuits, and this case proves that such amendments can be more than empty words.

Montana's constitution calls for "adequate remedies to prevent unreasonable depletion and degradation of natural resources." As an earlier Montana court reasoned, this "clearly indicates that Montanans have a right not only to reactive measures after a constitutionally-proscribed environmental harm has occurred, but to be free of its occurrence in the first place." Yet it is precisely because that harm has already occurred that the plaintiffs could bring their case at all. For these sixteen young people, and for countless others across the state and around the world, there is no way to recover the lost days of fishing caused by low water levels, the lost opportunities to participate in generations-old traditions that rely on seasonal patterns disrupted by climate change, or the lost views of glaciers and mountains caused by wildfire smoke and high temperatures. We should celebrate *Held*, and it should inspire us to greater action. But we should never forget what's already been lost.

—Isabella Simon

The Coup in Niger

On July 26, a coup in Niger removed the country's democratically elected president, Mohamed Bazoum. The junta insisted it acted because of the government's inadequate response to Islamic extremism, but the man who has emerged as the coup leader, General Abdourahmane Tchiani, led the presidential guard for twelve years and reportedly moved against Bazoum because he feared that Bazoum was about to fire him. In the weeks since, the junta has said it will prosecute the former president for treason, a crime punishable by death. Tchiani has promised to return the government to civilian control within three years.

Niger is the sixth country in the Sahel region of Africa to experience a coup since 2020. Most of these coups have received little coverage in Western media, but the one in Niger has grabbed the world's attention. "Western countries saw Mr. Bazoum as a friendly figure in a rough neighborhood," writes Declan Walsh at the *New York Times*. The country was a partner for the United States and France, Niger's former colonizer, in their regional counterterrorism strategy. Since 2012, the United States has spent more than $500 million in Niger on counterterrorism efforts; there are currently 1,100 U.S. troops and 1,500 French troops stationed there, along with several U.S. drone bases. Under the alliance between the West and Bazoum, fatalities from Islamist violence decreased, but the Western presence may have contributed to tensions that resulted in the coup.

The coup also has the potential to spark larger conflicts. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has threatened an invasion to reinstate Bazoum. Burkina Faso and Mali, which recently experienced coups of their own, support the junta and have threatened to invade if ECOWAS intervenes. Niger could also become a battleground between Western powers and Russia or China as they seek to expand their influence in Africa. Russia's Wagner group has conducted counterterrorism operations in Mali and other parts of Africa, and could be welcomed by the junta as an alternative to Western allies.

The coup in Niger brings another aspect of U.S. counterterrorism strategy under scrutiny: the Pentagon's practice of training military officers in its partner countries. Nick Turse reports at the *Intercept* that at least fifteen officers who received training in the United States have been involved in twelve coups in West Africa and the Sahel. The Nigerien junta includes at least five U.S.-trained officers. One of these, Brigadier General Moussa Salaou Barmou, received training at Ft. Moore in Georgia and visited a drone base with a senior U.S. general just six weeks before the coup.

The Pentagon insists that "there is no correlation between the training that [the officers] received and their activities," but a study of the U.S.-trained Liberian military by Renanah Joyce found that those with U.S. training were less likely to prioritize human rights and more likely to support one-party rule. "Good tactical training that occurs in the context of weak, corrupt, or illiberal institutions—political and military—is likely to do no good and may do harm," she explains.

Stephanie Savell of the Costs of War Project at Brown University agrees. "The major issues fueling conflict… are not military in nature. [They] stem from people's frustration with poverty, the legacy of colonialism, elite corruption, and political and ethnic tensions and injustices." Training militaries without addressing the underlying causes of poverty and conflict is "ineffective and counterproductive." This is a lesson the U.S. government has repeatedly failed to learn in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. Will we finally learn it in Africa?

—Regina Munch

SUSAN BIGELOW REYNOLDS

Water, Mud, Fire

Bringing Mass to Matamoros

Flavio Bravo, SJ, and Louie Hotop, SJ, celebrate the 2023 Easter Vigil in a migrant encampment on the bank of the Rio Grande in Matamoros, Mexico.

In a migrant camp, liturgy is an act of bricolage.

It's Holy Thursday. I am in Brownsville, Texas, spending Holy Week with a community of Jesuits who minister to migrants throughout the Rio Grande Valley. The three of them—Brian Strassburger, Louie Hotop, and Flavio Bravo—live in a small, tidy house in the *colonia* of Cameron Park that they've named for Miguel Pro, the joyful Jesuit martyr executed during Mexico's Cristero War.

Our car inches across Gateway International Bridge toward Matamoros, Brownsville's Mexican sister city. Hemispheric political crises, coupled with restrictive, constantly changing U.S. immigration policies, have transformed border cities like Matamoros into sites of desperation for migrants driven from home by gang violence and economic collapse. The migrant camp first appeared there in 2018 and disbanded in 2021, after the termination of the Trump-era Remain in Mexico program. But near the end of 2022, the priests began to hear rumors that the Matamoros camp had reappeared. They drove across the border to find out. The rumors were true: the camp was back. But conditions had shifted. Though far from comfortable, the first camp had basic infrastructure. A trans-border network of NGOs and faith-based organizations, including Catholic Charities Rio Grande Valley, collaborated with Mexican authorities to provide access to showers, toilets, medical services, clothes-washing stations, food, and water. But government officials had lost patience with the camp. Prohibited from pitching tents in the plaza, migrants slept on sidewalks. Four months later, thousands are surviving in makeshift shelters down a steep embankment covered with mesquite trees and trash along the muddy bank of the Rio Grande.

The car is packed full of liturgical things and things made liturgical. A monstrance on loan from another church is zipped into the laptop pocket of a backpack. A brass thurible, borrowed and patinated with age, is nestled into a bright red HEB bag, and the bells adorning its chains jingle every time we hit a bump. The trunk holds other treasures: a stack of bilingual hymnals; metal folding chairs; a suitcase filled with vestments, an altar cloth, and tiny vials of water and wine; a giant speaker; sliced bread and bags full of grapes; a basket of white pipe-cleaner bracelets that Brian and Louie have strung with craft-store jingle bells for people to ring during the Gloria.

In the camp, wooden pallets stacked beneath a twisted mesquite tree become an altar. Extension cords run like rivers down from the base of each streetlight and fan out into deltas of cords on cords, and Flavio hooks up the speaker to the web of pirated electricity. We arrange the folding chairs next to the altar for the washing of the feet.

At this point we realize we've forgotten a critical element: water. Under normal circumstances, we'd just turn on the tap. But in a migrant camp, water is a fiercely guarded commodity. We hear about a fight that broke out over water the night before. Someone was stabbed. There are tanks throughout the camp, but some people say that the water makes them sick. Others try to drink from the river, but that makes them even sicker. "*¿Quién tiene agua?*" Flavio calls out in a voice that sounds more like an invitation than a request. *Who has water?* Someone comes forward with their jug and a plastic ladle. It's the ultimate act of generosity—an act of holy waste. Water is precious because it is scarce, and here we are, Mary of Bethany, anointing people's feet with it one ladle at a time. A grinning seven-year-old girl hops into the chair first, wiggling off her shoes and swinging her legs. A young woman with a toddler takes the seat beside her and the people around her help remove the little boy's shoes as she removes her own. The priests bend low to wash, dry, and kiss each pair of feet.

SUSAN BIGELOW REYNOLDS

That night it rains ferociously. The littered earth becomes mud, and no one sleeps. People dig trenches around their tents to try to divert the water, but nothing can stop the rain from lashing apart shelters. The next morning, the road into Matamoros is flooded and chaotic. In the camp, people stand huddled with their arms pulled into their shirts. A mother named Yanetzy sits on an overturned bucket, her three-year-old daughter curled in a damp blanket on her lap. Yanetzy's cherry-red hair is streaked with brown, and I can tell how long ago she left home in Venezuela by how far her roots have grown out. All I can think is that she is the most tired person I have ever seen.

But there are small wonders, too. This morning a woman finally received her *cita*—her appointment for asylum processing by border patrol. Asylum-seekers are required to use a smartphone app called CBP One to request entry into the United States. The system is effectively a lottery: every day at 10 a.m., migrants enter their information into the glitchy app in the hopes of securing a coveted appointment at a port of entry. Nearly everyone is denied, with no other choice but to try again the next day, and the next. But once in a while, the stars align. A Good Friday miracle.

Before we left Casa Miguel Pro, Louie and Flavio had packed the car with a stack of flattened cardboard boxes that had been accumulating against their kitchen wall. Now, they spread the boxes on the ground and lean a crucifix retrieved from the trunk against the makeshift altar. When the service begins, the priests step forward in silence and flatten their bodies onto the cardboard on top of the mud. Prostrate before the foot of the cross, they press their faces into the same unforgiving ground on which everyone else has spent a sleepless night, and the soles of their shoes, which face the sky, are, like everyone else's, caked in mud.

The liturgy ends with a *via crucis* through the middle of the camp. The procession winds up the mud-slicked hill and into the flooded street, through a metal turnstile, and into the plaza at the foot of the international bridge. We carry a ten-foot cross that a man in the camp has built from two giant pieces of scrap wood. When we return to the site of the altar, someone is waiting. He wants to know if he can keep the cardboard for the floor of his tent.

The bishop has given the Jesuits permission to celebrate the Easter Vigil early, so on Saturday we leave for Matamoros after lunch. There is a stainless-steel mixing bowl covered with a baking sheet on the floor of the passenger seat, and I'm instructed to make sure it doesn't tip over. I glance inside the bowl. "Epsom salt and rubbing alcohol," Louie explains before I have a chance to inquire about the science experiment at my feet. "For the fire."

Today, CPB One is giving everyone the same error message: "You must be near the southwest border of the United States to make an appointment at a port of entry." The app uses geolocation to require that users be north of Mexico City to apply. The error is ridiculous, of course. Any closer to the border and we would all be in the water. The app isn't the only thing malfunctioning. The electricity isn't working in the usual spot, either. "*¿Quién tiene luz?*" Flavio calls out. *Who has power?* A group of men across the way summon us over to their electrical strip.

A man offers to hold the towering scrap-wood cross, and we stand in a circle in the middle of the camp. Louie lights the bowl, and silky red flames erupt from the ground between us. He lowers a candle into the paschal fire and raises it to the sky. *"¡Luz de Cristo!"* he sings. *"¡Gracias a Dios!"* we respond. Three times we repeat the refrain, falling into a procession behind the Easter candle. We light our candles from the flame and splotches of wax fall like raindrops onto the gray-brown earth.

At some point, children playing on the hillside decide to become a band of altar servers, and they are visibly enthralled to discover that their newly assumed responsibilities include retrieving the smoldering thurible from the tree branch where it hangs. Louie blesses the altar and the gifts. Then he walks to the front of the altar to bless the people. Slowly and with great care, he moves around the circle, gently swinging the thurible before each person. When he reaches the edge of the crowd, he returns to the center, closes his eyes, and bows to them.

Prostrate before the foot of the cross, they press their faces into the same unforgiving ground on which everyone else has spent a sleepless night.

On the ride home, my mind turns to my students, who sometimes ask the question that any rational person faced with reality asks: What good are candles and incense and bells when people are starving? I usually reply that we would do well to be suspicious of the capitalist assumption that prayer is only for people who can afford things. I see now that the real answer is whatever I just witnessed.

In the end, when the last fire burns itself out and the last mesquite tree falls and the final light goes out, when the rain washes away the trash and the mud and the shit and the last bridge is crossed and the last detention center closed and Christ who died and rose comes again, reconciling everything to himself, and sin is no more, and death is no more, and nothing is wasted, we'll meet and bow to one another, and there we'll stand, Christ and all of us, our feet washed, our wounds kissed, our heads perfumed.

SUSAN BIGELOW REYNOLDS *is assistant professor of Catholic Studies at Candler School of Theology at Emory University.*

Pete Seeger performs at a protest in New York, October 1975.

ZUMA PRESS, INC./ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ANDREW J. BACEVICH

Waist Deep in the Big Muddy

What can the Vietnam War teach us about the war in Ukraine?

I spent part of the long Independence Day weekend listening to an old recording of "Woody's Children," a folk-music program that premiered in 1969 and ran for several decades on New York's WQXR. The particular program that I tuned into was first broadcast in October of that year, coinciding with the Vietnam moratorium. Not surprisingly, it consisted entirely of antiwar songs, a genre then at the height of its popularity.

I had missed the show the first time around. In October 1969, I was attending Ranger School at Fort Benning, Georgia, as a freshly minted, Vietnam-bound army second lieutenant. At the time, I felt no particular affinity for antiwar activists or their music.

Hearing the program for the first time in July 2023 nearly brought me to tears. That said, much of the music itself, although decidedly earnest, has not aged well. Frequently maudlin and bluntly didactic, the lyrics tend to lack subtlety. Yet as a political testimonial, the entire protest genre holds up remarkably well. Even today, with the folk revival of the sixties a distant memory, it retains underappreciated relevance.

But fifty-some years later, the peace movement itself is on life support. Efforts to curb America's appetite for war have simply failed. The draft-eligible Baby Boomers who marched against the Vietnam War in their youth tacitly embraced militarism once they reached the heights of political, academic, journalistic, and corporate power.

The facts speak for themselves. When it comes to military spending, the United States leads the pack internationally. No nation or combination of nations comes anywhere close. When it comes to an actual propensity to use force, no nation

(with the possible exception of Israel) can match the United States. Even so, in American politics, there is no peace party worthy of note. The results of failed wars such as Afghanistan and Iraq are forgotten with astonishing swiftness. Principled opposition to war is a fringe phenomenon.

Among the antiwar anthems reprised on "Woody's Children" in October 1969, one in particular caught my ear: "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy." Written and performed by Pete Seeger, the ballad recounts a World War II training exercise in which the officer in charge insists on seeing the mission through even as swampy conditions deteriorate. The wise sergeant foresees disaster ahead, but "the big fool says to push on." Orders are orders, a stubborn blindness that will cost the officer dearly.

In 1969, the "big fool" was President Lyndon B. Johnson, whose response to difficulties in Vietnam was to throw more troops into the fray, expecting to transform stalemate into victory. Seeger's "big fool" was immune to learning. So was LBJ, even as the years passed and the violence escalated.

From today's vantage point, the folly of Vietnam that Seeger and others on the folk scene denounced appears self-evident. As a result of his plunge into the Big Muddy, President Johnson's reputation sustained damage from which it has never recovered. Fifty-eight thousand Americans died for nothing.

Yet my own Independence Day rumination left me wondering yet again whether the United States had learned much of anything from the defeat it experienced in Vietnam—and whether President Biden, in his own meandering way, is not retracing LBJ's footsteps.

Adherence to three distinct principles prompted Johnson to intervene the way he did in Vietnam. First was the imperative of confronting perceived evil. Second was the requirement to do so directly by employing force. The third principle was the necessity of playing to ostensible American strengths while minimizing our vulnerabilities. Underlying this third principle was a conviction that, because of our superior technology and strategy, the United States has war figured out.

On the basis of those principles, Johnson persuaded himself (or was persuaded) that ensuring the survival of South Vietnam constituted a vital U.S. national-security interest. It was a cause worth fighting for as well as a winnable one. Superior firepower and mobility would enable U.S. forces to defeat an adversary generally lacking in modern arms.

The actual realities in Vietnam contradicted all of those principles. The enemy doggedly refused to be beaten, the lavish application of American weaponry only produced higher casualties, and the final outcome demonstrated conclusively that Vietnam itself was of no more than marginal importance to U.S. national security.

Yet in Washington, the three principles found wanting in Vietnam remained stubbornly intact and formed the basis of U.S. policy going forward, most notably in a series of military interventions, large and small, in the greater Middle East. In 2003, the George W. Bush administration launched the most ambitious of those interventions when it invaded Iraq, initiating a campaign intended ultimately to eliminate evil itself.

Bush persuaded himself (or was persuaded) that the United States had no alternative but to oust Saddam Hussein's regime. Here, it seemed, was a cause worth fighting for and a winnable one, with U.S. forces seemingly in possession of near-invincible capabilities.

To say that the ensuing Iraq War proved to be a repeat of Vietnam is both wildly wrong and essentially correct. The dry and dusty "look" of the Iraq War differed radically from Vietnam's jungles and rice paddies. But once U.S. forces had waded into the Big Muddy of the Tigris and Euphrates and superior American arms once again failed to yield the expected victory, the Big Fool in the White House saw no choice but to push on, as did his successor. Once more, as in Vietnam, a chastened United States eventually found itself obliged to withdraw.

What lessons had the United States taken from the Iraq War (and from its Afghan sibling)? How have those lessons informed the Biden administration's policy regarding the war occurring on its own watch?

Once again, the "look" of the Ukraine War differs from the "look" of either Vietnam or Iraq. This is a classic conventional conflict pitting regular forces against one another on a linear and largely static battlefield.

Yet in Washington, the underlying principles that informed the Vietnam and Iraq Wars remain intact. First, there is the imperative of confronting evil, with Vladimir Putin now cast in the role once assigned to Ho Chi Minh and Saddam Hussein. Second is the necessity of employing armed force; the mere idea of diplomacy is viewed as tantamount to immoral appeasement. Third is the effort to devise a suitable design for victory, in this instance providing a plentiful supply of arms while allowing Ukrainians to do the actual fighting.

On the last point, however, President Biden's preference for relying on proxies should not conceal the fact that while the Big Muddy may now be the Dnieper, the waters are rising. An end to this war is not in sight, even as pressures to escalate increase; Biden's decision to provide Ukraine with cluster munitions is the latest example of his willingness to cave to those pressures. Meanwhile, sensitive questions about the war's origins and the United States' actual interests are often avoided.

But the echoes of Vietnam and Iraq are difficult to ignore. And as Pete Seeger wrote,

> Every time I read the papers
> That old feeling comes on;
> We're waist deep in the Big Muddy
> And the big fool says to push on.

Among recent U.S. presidents, Joe Biden is not uniquely foolish. But like his predecessors going back to LBJ, he lacks imagination. And so we stumble deeper into the swamp, oblivious to the consequences that await.

ANDREW J. BACEVICH *is chairman and cofounder of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft.*

DOROTHY FORTENBERRY

Sweat & Solidarity

A dispatch from the writers' strike

A day on the picket line begins with considering the heat. It's August. I live in the Valley. Even in the best of times, even in a merely "normal hot" summer and not a "climate change is breaking daily temperature records across the globe" summer, it would be quite hot, and spending hours outside in direct sunlight during the middle of the day would be the kind of thing I would work hard to avoid. But because there is a strike going on and I need to picket, staying home is not an option. And so I consider the heat and how best to protect myself.

The Writers Guild is on strike and has been for months. On August 9, we officially reached one hundred days. The Screen Actors Guild has been by our side for the past month, having joined the strike during the hot weather and staying while it gets even hotter. The toll on each of us is specific, personal. It varies depending on our economic circumstances, our health, where we are in our careers, whether we have children or pets or relatives we care for—and if any of them feel like walking in circles with us in the noonday sun.

At times, the challenge that has been hardest for me has been the weird alienation that comes from not doing a job that I love, or the anxieties around what lies on the other side of this for myself and for our whole industry. Sometimes it's insecurity borne of hearing other writers chat about the novels they are writing in their newfound free time or the spec scripts that they can't wait to unleash. But today, I am mostly thinking about getting dressed.

After three months, I've hit on my ideal picket ensemble, a look that I like call "amateur zookeeper." I wear long, loose pants, a Writers Guild strike t-shirt, with a pale-blue SPF 50 button-down on top. To this I add a giant straw hat, sunglasses, thin gloves (both for sun protection and sign grippage), a fanny pack for my ID, keys, and Writers Guild card, and bright turquoise walking shoes. It keeps me cool in the literal sense—and only in the literal sense.

I grab my water bottle (a staff gift from a show years ago, now so banged up with wear and tear that the show's name has worn off) and head out the door. From where I live, I can walk or bike to Disney or take the bus to Universal. If I'm meeting a friend—the picket catch-up is the new "cup of coffee or maybe a hike"—I'll drive or take the subway to Amazon or Netflix or Paramount.

Some days—with a great conversation with friends, delicious snacks baked by our intrepid strike captains or dropped off in a box from Jay Leno, a fiery and inspirational speech or two—it's genuinely fun, a delightful, transportive experience. Most days it's fine: not the exercise I'd seek out, maybe, but if you keep your headphones out of your ears (and most people do), there's always someone interesting to talk to. Some days, it's less than fine. All days it's hot.

And, when conversation lags, there's time to consider big questions. For one, why are we doing this? Well, that one I know the answer to: the disruptions of the streaming model make it much harder for writers to earn the living they used to, and more disruptions are on the way. We're striking for the same reason that we struck over VHS technology and the advent of the internet—because large companies will always use technological advances to harm workers unless someone stops them. Because we've watched other good, creative jobs get gobbled up by hedge funds and monopolies and we don't want to be next. Because we've seen that you don't get what you don't fight for.

Other things I wonder: Why can't a group of writers script better rally chants? Seriously, folks. "Hey hey / ho ho" in 2023? And, why did it take so long for Universal to give us a few feet of sidewalk to stand on? No clue.

But the thing I think about most is the idea of solidarity: how destabilizing it feels after decades of internet-based atomization followed by COVID-era seclusion to be in a large, powerful group of strangers actually talking to each other.

How precious, how rare it is to be doing something alongside another person. It's not purely an act of charity, nor an act of pure selfishness, but an act where our collective behavior benefits us both—an act that makes no sense unless it's done by a group for a group. If I personally had stopped working in May and paced up and down in front of Disney for months, I would have been a curiosity, at best. Probably I simply would have been invisible. But in the thousands, we have the potential to disrupt billions of dollars of entertainment industry business and thereby make ourselves noticed. It works for all of us but only if we all do it.

To quote from *Fratelli tutti*, and here Pope Francis is quoting himself:

> Solidarity means much more than engaging in sporadic acts of generosity. It means thinking and acting in terms of community. It means that the lives of all are prior to the appropriation of goods by a few. It also means combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land, and housing, the denial of social and labour rights.

For me, the opportunity to be on strike is a chance to put this often theoretical notion of solidarity into practice. To embody the sometimes hollow op-ed encomium to "focus on what unites us instead of what divides us." It is certainly more comfortable to sit on a couch in the air conditioning and have ideas about society. Sitting comfortably and having ideas about society is one of my greatest pleasures (please invite me on your podcast). Walking in the same circle with no shade next to jackhammers, striking up chit-chat with someone I've never met before is not comfortable at all. Sitting comfortably also allows me to curate the circle of people I interact

Writers and actors on the picket line, June 21, 2023

FLICKR/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

with, whereas on the picket line, we get all kinds of folks: extroverted actors in sequins, elder screenwriters weeks away from hip surgeries, young support staff showing their encouragement and gently networking, members of IATSE taking the opportunity to explain the labor issues facing their union in advance of their own negotiations this fall. People bring their kids. People bring their parents. People bring their dogs.

In *Fratelli tutti*, Francis remarks of digital relationships, "They lack the physical gestures, facial expressions, moments of silence, body language and even the smells, the trembling of hands, the blushes and perspiration that speak to us and are a part of human communication." I promise you that, especially given the prevalence of natural deodorant in the Los Angeles writer/actor community, we are getting very well acquainted with each other's smells and perspiration.

And we are also getting accustomed to a style of communication that feels like the opposite of internet speech. Online, the only discourse options are Twitter (do I have to call it "X"?) despair or Instagram jubilation. Our lives are either the unceasing grind of late capitalism as filtered through self-diagnosed mental illness or an amazing series of vacations and professional wins.

But on the picket line, people can just talk, for real. I ran into a woman while picketing whom I know well enough to have seen the glossy exterior of her successful career, but while we walked, she opened up about the toll it took—and the horrible treatment she received from the companies for whom she created profits. I ran into a man, again someone I really don't know that well, who opened up to me about parenting challenges with disarming honesty. I've had people tell me about industry professionals who lied to their faces, jobs they were promised that never materialized, the day they decided once and for all to freeze their eggs. None of these were succinct quips of gloom or glory; they were the stuff of life, as it's lived. Messy, hesitant. "Is this too much?" "Can I talk about addiction?" "I don't want to name names, but—"

And I talked too, about what's been going well for me and what's been hard, about work stuff and life stuff and the place where life stuff meets work stuff. I've walked with women decades older than I am who opened up about the sexism they faced in their early careers. I've walked with recent grads who are anxious that the degrees they just took out loans for may be in a field that no longer exists.

I've talked, but I've tried to listen more. And, when there's nothing else to say, I've tried to fill in the silence with companionable presence. To walk politely, accommodating people's different paces and gaits. To make sure that people remember to hydrate. To share my sunscreen.

Sometimes someone is going through something to which there is no easy response—there are people who talk about their employment-dependent health insurance lapsing in a few weeks or their partners needing to pick up extra work to make up for the loss of income. A strike is meant to be painful for the corporations, but it is not easy for the strikers or other affected workers, and there are problems that no Jay Leno doughnuts can fix. (The Entertainment Community Fund is the best financial resource for anyone in the business who is facing hardship—or for anyone not in the business who would like to donate.)

One of the reasons it's easy and pleasant to have ideas in air conditioning is that there's always a better plan somewhere else, one not burdened by the unpleasant humanity of actual people. I can't know that there's not a hypothetical Earth 2 where a strike was averted because everyone was smarter and better than the Earthlings we have here. But I do know that, given everything we've seen over the past months and years, and given the deal we were offered, striking felt like the only choice. And that once we had begun, we were committed to winning. As Francis reminds us, ideas may be fun, but "true wisdom demands an encounter with reality."

And the best way that I've found to encounter reality is daily: on the line, in the heat, side by sweaty side. For as long as it takes.

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AUSTEN IVEREIGH

Room for Everyone

World Youth Day in Lisbon

Ever since they began under St. John Paul II in the 1980s, World Youth Days (WYDs)—week-long festivals of faith held every two or three years in a different city—have been associated with exuberant piety, vast crowds, and life-changing personal moments when young people encounter the universality of the Church and find the courage to commit to Christ in different vocations. But they are tough to organize: most WYDs have seen transport networks and crowd-management measures at different moments collapse under the strain.

Not this time. The WYD in Lisbon (August 1–6) will go down as one of the best attended and most impeccably executed of the seventeen so far. Pope Francis told reporters on the flight back to Rome that, of the four he had experienced as pope, this one was the best organized. There were more than 600,000 registered pilgrims and 900,000 unregistered ones (plus six hundred bishops, fifty cardinals, and ten thousand priests) flooding in for the Saturday night vigil and Sunday morning Mass at Tejo Park next to the Tagus River. This was also the most diverse WYD yet, with pilgrims from every nation in the world except the Maldives.

For an event in one of Europe's smallest nations (Portugal has a population of just 10 million), it was a huge achievement, a shot of adrenaline and pride in the arms of both Church and nation. *Lisboetas*, thousands of whom opened their bedrooms and bathrooms to the pilgrims, were initially intimidated at the sheer scale of the crowds, but they were soon won over by all the innocent joy and kindness. The city's police chief said that his force had never dealt with a crowd so large and yet good-natured.

The Portuguese Church's WYD czar was the dynamic Américo Aguiar, the Lisbon auxiliary bishop whom Francis has made a cardinal. Dom Américo faced the challenge of keeping up the organizing momentum through repeated Covid postponements—Lisbon took place four and a half years after Panama—but he also reaped the harvest of a pent-up yearning on the part of the young to come together after the long isolation of lockdown. "At a time when we are witnessing on many sides a climate of protest and unrest, a fertile terrain for forms of populism and conspiracy theories, World Youth Day represents a chance to build together," the pope told Portuguese authorities on his arrival.

Dom Américo's genius was to recognize what this moment—a time of war, mass displacement, and climate emergency—called for, especially in the wake of Francis's 2020 encyclical *Fratelli tutti*. Dom Américo said in the run-up to Lisbon that this would be an event that consolidated the keynotes of this pontificate, creating a "Generation

Lisbon" to build a better future for the Church and the world.

While outwardly this WYD appeared to follow the by-now familiar format, it had some unique characteristics reflecting this pope's priorities. These can be summarized in four words: *ecological*, *synodal*, *digital*, and *fraternal*.

Ecological. A huge effort was made to make this WYD as "ecologically responsible" as possible. Climate change and the destruction of the natural world remain top concerns for young people, and Pope Francis's teaching on integral ecology—which locates the source of the crisis in a mindset that rejects our creatureliness—was the first of the three topics the pilgrims studied. Francis warned Portuguese authorities that "we are transforming great reserves of life into dumping grounds of plastic" and told students at Lisbon's Catholic University that "unless faith gives rise to convincing lifestyles, it will not be a 'leaven' in the world." The WYD app offered to calculate carbon offsets and the organizers sent out a "manual of good practices for a sustainable WYD," covering everything from transport to meals and accommodation. Pilgrims were asked to avoid single-use plastic and to recycle as much as they could. They were also asked to plant trees before coming (it was reported that 18,000 trees were planted). Every pilgrim kit included a reusable water bottle, which could be refilled for free at water points across the city, but organizers stopped short of banning throwaway plastic bottles from WYD events.

Synodal. At previous WYDs, the young people were involved in creating music and prayers, but the catechesis itself was done in a traditional top-down way, with bishops speaking and young people listening. This year at the so-called "Rise-Ups," more than

Pilgrims before the opening Mass for World Youth Day in Lisbon, Portugal, August 1, 2023

OSV NEWS PHOTO/BOB ROLLER

four hundred bishops from around the world heard from young people about the questions that arose from their pre-WYD dialogues on the topics of integral ecology, social friendship, and the mercy of God.

"This time the young people are the protagonists of the encounters and reflections," Fr. Nuno Amador, head of the Lisbon WYD's pastoral office, told journalists. Sr. Nathalie Becquart of the synod secretariat in Rome told me that this was a sign of how the synod is helping Church organizations rethink the way they do things.

There were many moments and places in Lisbon that showed a Church keen to listen to experience before offering judgment, and where the synod was seen as a model of how the Church is called to be. But it was mostly the pope himself who underlined the synod theme of a Church without borders, rousing the sea of young people at the welcome ceremony with words that became the emblem of Lisbon that week: "In the Church, there is room for everyone. *Everyone*. In the Church, no one is left out or left over. There is room for everyone. Just the way we are. *Everyone*."

Digital. In a sign that the Church increasingly sees the digital sphere as a place to evangelize, Lisbon's WYD hosted the first-ever world meeting of digital evangelizers and missionaries. With encouragement from the pope and the synod secretariat, Msgr. Lucio Ruiz of the Vatican's communications dicastery has mobilized a growing network of Catholic "influencers"—Catholics in social media who have developed large followings and who see themselves as evangelizers—to gather more than 150,000 answers to a series of questions adapted from the synod questionnaire.

The August 4 "Festival of Catholic Influencers" brought them all together for the first time: 577 digital missionaries from sixty-eight countries met face-to-face in Martim Moniz square with twenty thousand young people. The event ended with a lengthy blessing from the retired Honduran cardinal, Oscar Rodríguez de Maradiaga. Flanked by Paolo Ruffini, prefect of the communications dicastery, the cardinal blessed "these missionaries and evangelizers, so that, filled with the grace they received at baptism and being sent out by the Church, they might carry out with fidelity the mission of Christ's Church, especially in the digital environment."

The blessing was an important step toward the Vatican recognizing an apostolic mission to the digital sphere—as were comments by the head of the Vatican's evangelization dicastery, Cardinal "Chito" Tagle, who told the influencers at the end of a Mass for them the previous day that he was happy for the digital world to be recognized "as a territory, a space, not just a means." He said that this was a "new world of communion and mission" for the Church.

Fraternal. Fratelli tutti, Francis's 2020 call to fraternity, was one of the three catechesis topics for the pilgrims, who discussed the topic against the backdrop of Putin's invasion of Ukraine and a new tide of nationalism. But this was also the most ecumenical and interreligious WYD yet. Not only did the pope meet seventeen religious leaders in Lisbon's apostolic nunciature on August 5, but for the first time at a WYD there was a Pentecostal-Evangelical praise event, organized by a Portuguese pastor, Rodrigues Pereira, in conjunction with Catholic charismatics through their worldwide body CHARIS. The event, called "The Change," attracted 45,000 people, mostly Evangelicals, to the Benfica football stadium to hear from pastors and evangelists.

The most prophetic element of WYD 2023 was the bid to create and defend a space where searchers and sinners and those who don't feel they quite fit can encounter the mercy of Christ. For Francis, creating that open space is crucial to the Church's capacity to negotiate this "change of era." Hence his constant insistence that the Church is a place for all.

Francis used his first-day address in Lisbon specifically to warn the Church against proselytism, which he said was always the sign of a diocese or organization in trouble. "It is Christian to invite, to welcome, to help, but without proselytism," he told bishops, clergy, and religious at Vespers in the Ieronymite Monastery in Belém on August 2. "First they should hear the invitation of Jesus," he added. "[R]epentance comes later, closeness to Jesus comes later." Do not turn the Church into a customs house reserved for the righteous while everyone else remains outside, he warned. "No. That is not the Church. Righteous and sinners, good and bad: everyone, everyone, everyone."

At the same time, Francis's messages to the young people were deeply Christocentric, constantly inviting them to listen to Jesus, to hear His call, to let Him look at them and love them as they are, to let Him accompany them, to welcome Jesus into their hearts and to love others as He loves them. The pope's final words at the vast Mass in Tejo Park were an invitation to surrender: "Today, he says to you, here in Lisbon, at this World Youth Day: 'Have no fear, take heart, do not be afraid!'"

For Francis, the emphasis on a welcoming, merciful Church that facilitates the direct encounter with Christ is key to evangelizing contemporary society. This isn't about persuading others of the superiority of the Catholic offer, but about a conversion of hearts that follows from meeting Jesus.

There was nowhere better for developing that missionary vision than at the World Youth Day in Lisbon, which showcased a Church that is of its time—ecological, synodal, digital, and fraternal—and a Church that is passionate about making space for all to encounter Jesus Christ. This WYD, likely Francis's last, has firmly consolidated the future his pontificate has helped make possible.

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A longer version of this report is available on the Commonweal *website.*

In Helsinki, trams and bicycles put cars in their place.

TAPIO HAAJA/UNSPLASH

PAUL J. GRIFFITHS

On the Edge of Empires

Letter from Helsinki

I arrive in Helsinki on June 18 for a six-week stay. I'm close to the end of a book I've been working on for more than a year, and I want a bolt-hole where I can complete a draft. I choose Helsinki because I've not been there before, because I know no one there, and because I don't know any Finnish. I'll be able, I think, to write for half of each day and explore the city for the other half. I hope, too, for light. Helsinki at the summer solstice has only a few hours between sunset and sunrise, and even those are reputed to be radiant, tinged with indigo. For the rest of the day, the light should be clear and intense. For reasons I can't quite formulate, these seem like good conditions for bringing a book to completion.

Less than a week after I move into the apartment I've rented in Helsinki's Kallio neighborhood, it appears that Russia might be about to collapse into civil war. Mercenary troops under the command of Yevgeny Prigozhin, who have been fighting for Russia in Ukraine, are on the road to Moscow. The threat to the Putin regime seems real enough that heavy machinery is deployed to break up Moscow's perimeter roads so as to make the entry of armored vehicles into that city more difficult. Some Russian panjandrums, perhaps including Putin himself, appear to leave the city.

This would have been exciting enough had I been at home in America, but in Helsinki it's especially interesting because the city is only a little more than one hundred miles from the Russian border, and because Russia has been a large and mostly malign presence in Finland's past. The territory we now call Finland was, from 1809 to 1917, a Grand Duchy of Imperial Rus-

sia. Finnish independence in 1917 was accompanied by violence and intertwined with the conflict between Reds and Whites following the Russian revolution. There was a bloody war between independent Finland and Soviet Russia between 1939 and 1940; and although Finland succeeded in maintaining independence from Soviet Russia then and after, doing so required compromises. The territorial expansions of Putin's Russia, most recently the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have intensified the sense of threat and uncertainty on the part of those countries that border Russia—and Finland has the longest land border with Russia of any European country.

I am exercised, then, by the events of June 23 and 24. The Finnish authorities make reassuring noises: there is, they say, no sign of threat to Finnish territorial integrity, and Finland has no stake in whatever is going on in Russia. Events play out, puzzlingly: Prigozhin's troops retreat; some deal is done; the Putin regime stands. Late on June 23, I ask the clerk (thirtyish, much tattooed) in the store where I've been buying my groceries what he thinks of events in Russia that day. He replies, "I have no care for Russia; Russians can go fuck themselves." It's hard for me to know how representative his view is. But certainly the city is behaving as usual: the midsummer festival is that same weekend, and the internal uncertainties of Putin's Russia do not, so far as I can tell, affect the celebrations at all.

The disturbance in Russia happens as the war in Ukraine continues, a war begun by Russian aggression and sustained in large part by American dollars and equipment. This war seems to have been the principal reason why Finland finally sought full membership in NATO in 2022 and received it in April 2023. For decades before that Finns had been ambivalent about NATO, and sometimes strongly opposed to joining it. That ambivalence belongs to a strong Finnish commitment to a heavily armed neutrality during the Cold War. But that began to change following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the invasion of Ukraine has completed the change: Finns now support full membership in NATO by a significant majority.

The U.S. government's delight at Finland's joining NATO is publicly signaled at the NATO summit in Vilnius in July, and then sealed by President Biden's visit to Helsinki on July 12 and 13, immediately following that summit. This is during the fourth week of my time in Helsinki. I catch, by accident, the tail of the presidential motorcade into the city late on the twelfth, and then seek out a prime spot for viewing the motorcade back out to the airport the following day. The route is lined with police and squads of unbearably young Finnish soldiers; a helicopter tracks it above; near the central railway station, where I'm watching, hundreds of locals and tourists raise their cell phones in a quasi-liturgical gesture of commemoration. We are silent before the spectacle of the fifty-two-vehicle motorcade (I counted). I think I see Biden himself, waving from inside the heavily armored limousine they call "the beast," but it's difficult to be sure, and perhaps my imagination is working overtime.

I feel a surge of sentiment. This corner of a foreign land is for a moment transfigured by an American real presence, and I am moved by that. But I also feel regret and shame. This visit, with its trappings of the imperium, closes down large parts of central Helsinki for eighteen hours. It is a display of unrivaled power and importance, which the caesars of Rome would have understood and appreciated. It also marks the increasingly militarized division of Europe into "Russia" and "the rest," which makes effectively impossible any third position of the kind that Finland and Sweden (still not a full member of NATO, but about to be) once occupied. No space is now allowed between America and its enemies—you're with us or against us. Hence my regret. But still: there is my president on a bright early afternoon in high summer in Helsinki, and here, just a few dozen yards away, am I, surrounded by Finns for whom this event is probably just an annoying, if exotic, visitation—a manifestation of the power of this present age, which comes, whether they know it or not, bearing arms and the high gloss of a universalist ideology.

Happily, Helsinki is not all geopolitical excitement. It is also lumberingly omnipresent trams, for which I quickly come to feel something close to love; a clean, fast, and efficient metro; many buses; and separated bicycle lanes almost everywhere, which are hospitable not just to bikes, pedaled and electric, but to electric scooters and various one-wheeled conveyances. There is a large and inexpensive fleet of city bicycles, which I take advantage of. The city is also excellent for walking, and I find it easy and interesting to get everywhere I want to go without a car. This is impossible in all but a few American towns and cities, and none, not even New York, comes close to Helsinki's efficiency in this matter. I live in a small city on the eastern seaboard of the United States where almost everyone drives almost everywhere almost all the time, and where, therefore, the car entirely dominates the cityscape. In Helsinki, cars are put in their place.

Not that Helsinki is an urban paradise. At least in the summer, there is some rough sleeping, though much less than in most U.S. cities these days. There's a noticeable amount of public drunkenness, together with the usual accompanying behaviors. And there's a lot of graffiti on buildings, mailboxes, and so on—though, oddly, almost none on trams, buses, or metro cars. Some parts of the city are evidently poorer than others, and in mixed or transitional neighborhoods like the one where my apartment is there are the normal territorial frictions. But for the most part, Helsinki seems easy to live and move about in, lovely to look at, and generally a delight.

I often go to the city's central library, Oodi, to write. It's a fine, swooping,

Linguistic difference is one way to foster the essential Catholic sense of longing for somewhere that isn't here.

high-modernist building, opened in 2018. Like most modern libraries on a large scale, it is dedicated as much to non-books as to books. There are coffee shops, virtual-reality rooms where I see people wearing large headsets and making surprising gestures, pointless in my world but no doubt full of purpose in the one they're inhabiting, a play area for children, a lounging area largely inhabited by teenagers, and so on. But it also has quiet rooms for reading and writing, and I work in one of those most days I'm there.

On my second or third visit I stop at the chess area on my way out and watch a game in progress. It's between two scowling teenagers who both seem heavily invested in victory. Ten minutes of watching them convinces me that I'd lose to either in short order. I turn away, looking to watch another game, and see a man sitting alone at one of the chess tables. He smiles and gestures interrogatively at the empty chair across from him—would I like to play? I would. He, I gather, is from Korea and long resident in Finland. He has no English, and I have neither Korean nor Finnish, and so we exchange pleasantries in bad French. He wins the game, and we shake hands. I repeat this several times during the following weeks, winning some games, losing others, and talking with Finns, mostly young, whom I wouldn't have met otherwise. Unlike my first opponent they all have fluent and idiomatic English, and most of them are interested in the United States, though none has been there. They are uniformly negative about Russia (I always ask): their eyes are turned West, not East. Several of them are surprised that an old American can play chess, and they want to know what I think of Finland, about whose political and economic and educational problems they are happy to tell me.

On the twenty-third of July, the sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, I'm at St. Henry's Cathedral for the 9:30 English Mass. I've been there several times before for Masses in Finnish, which reminded me both how well the liturgy can communicate without being understood and what a relief it is not to have to attend to the substance of what is said in the homily. The English Mass this morning prompts different thoughts. St. Henry's is a lovely church, consecrated in 1904 and dedicated to a twelfth-century bishop who is Finland's patron. It seats about two hundred and fifty, and today it is packed: extra chairs have been set out, and there are fifty or so people standing at the back and in the aisles by the time I arrive, just as the rosary is ending, ten minutes or so before Mass begins.

I pray briefly but spend most of those minutes listening to snatches of conversation around me. I hear Finnish of course, English, Italian, and Arabic; something that may be Farsi; and at least one African language I can't identify. All this is as it should be in a Catholic church. Hearing this linguistic variety makes me think about what a liturgy in English means for such a congregation. Probably more people here will understand English than any other living language, including Finnish. That is, I suppose, an argument in favor of English. But English is an imperial language, once of the British and now of the Americans. Can the Church not do better in a Babel-cursed world than speak the language of empire?

Perhaps she can. There is Latin, the language of a long-gone empire, it is true, but not of any living one; vernaculars divide and exclude, inevitably; English rules, also inevitably (I think again of the long presidential motorcade). Latin, by contrast, could unite, even if in incomprehension, and I'm back to the liturgy's capacity to communicate without being understood. Still, this liturgy—on a sun-flooded summer's morning in Helsinki, with the corvids cawing outside and a woman begging on the steps, and the Russian embassy, shuttered and dark, still strangely adorned with hammer and sickle a few hundred yards away—is done decently and in good order. Tears prick my eyes as I watch this multi-lingual crowd take Christ's body in hand and on tongue.

The Catholic Church is not much of a presence in Finland. Less than 1 percent of the population is Catholic. The whole country is a single diocese, and there are just two parishes in Helsinki, the capital city. The great churches of the city are Orthodox and Lutheran, as one would expect. I have no way of knowing how many of this morning's Mass-goers live here and how many are, like me, visitors. But even if it's only half, perhaps the future of the Catholic Church in Finland lies with those most at home in languages other than Finnish or English. That would be a blessing, probably, both for Finland and for the Catholics who live there. Catholics, like all Christians, should not feel too at home where they are, and linguistic difference is one way to foster the essential Catholic sense of longing for somewhere that isn't here.

I leave Helsinki on the thirtieth of July, a complete draft of the book in my carry-on. As I sit in the airport train, I think of what the city might be like in winter, of what the cold and dark—only four or five hours of light at the winter solstice—might show. I find myself surprisingly eager to find out. I also think again of geopolitics and Finland's edgy place in the conflicts of our time, and I hope that the country finds a way to compromise with Americanization in such a way as to preserve its idiosyncrasies, as it once managed to preserve them from the Sovietization of Eastern Europe.

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Sacred & Natural

Matt McManus

How the Right rationalizes inequality

In his famous book *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, the economist Albert Hirschman discusses three common rhetorical "theses" employed by the Right to blunt the appeal of progressive arguments. The thesis of perversity says that progressive reforms will exacerbate the very problems they're intended to solve; the thesis of futility says that such reforms will simply have no appreciable effect; the thesis of jeopardy warns that progressive overreach will threaten whatever progressives have already achieved. Hirschman's analysis is now widely accepted on the Left, but there are limitations to his approach. As its title suggests, *The Rhetoric of Reaction* conceives of the Right as essentially reactive—merely putting the brakes on progressive ideas. But while the modern Right may have been born of animosity to the Left's vision of the future, it has only survived and thrived by learning to present its own vision. In the eighteenth century it was the Jacobins who declared it Year One, but in 1980, it was Ronald Reagan who announced, echoing Thomas Paine, "We have it in our power to begin the world again." As Corey Robin writes in *The Reactionary Mind*:

> The conservative not only opposes the left; he also believes that the left has been in the driver's seat since, depending who's counting, the French Revolution or the Reformation. If he is to preserve what he values, the conservative must declare war against the culture as it is.… Even when the conservative claims to be preserving a present that's threatened or recovering a past that's been lost, he is impelled by his own activism and agency to confess that he's making a new beginning and creating the future.… [The conservative] develops a particular attitude toward political time, a belief in the power of men and women to shape history, to propel it forward or backward; and by virtue of that belief, he comes to adopt the future as his preferred tense.

In short, the Right is fully capable of developing its own utopian vision of the future, one where American flags are everywhere and immigrants are scarce. The Right's constructive dimension becomes especially prominent when conservatives think the Left has "been in the driver's seat" for too long and that, consequently, just conserving or holding ground is no longer enough. Today, many on the American Right feel conservatives should get out of the business of conserving and into the business of "regime change." As the right-wing commentator Glenn Ellmers put it in his essay "'Conservatism' is No Longer Enough," "practically speaking, there is almost nothing left to conserve. What is actually required now is a recovery, or even a refounding, of America as it was long and originally understood but which now exists only in the hearts and minds of a minority of citizens."

Republicans Spiro Agnew, Ronald Reagan, Richard Nixon, and John Mitchell in the Oval Office in 1971

JACK E. KIGHTLINGER/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

To understand what the Right means when they profess a desire "to begin the world again" or "refound" the country, we need to understand its affirmative rhetoric as well as the negative rhetoric Hirschman described. Two of the Right's most common affirmative theses are what we might call sublimation and naturalization.

Sublimation is perhaps the oldest affirmative thesis on the Right. Its roots lie in an ancient conception of society, one defined by what Charles Taylor, in *Modern Social Imaginaries*, calls "hierarchical complementarity." According to this conception, social hierarchy corresponds to a transcendent pattern that exists both within and beyond nature. The medieval image of a "Great Chain of Being" is one famous symbol of this conception. The modern Right's appeals to sublimation go back at least as far as Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution*, which declared that "sublime principles ought to be infused into persons of exalted situations, and religious establishments provided that may continually revive and enforce them…whenever man is put over men, as the better nature ought ever to preside, in that case more particularly, he should as nearly as possible be approximated to his perfection." As a summation of the sublimation thesis, this can't be improved upon, but it can perhaps be simplified as follows: sublimation entails the association of transcendent qualities with particular persons or whole classes in order to justify their superior status and wealth and their power over others.

Sublimation is intended to generate what Nietzsche, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, called a "pathos of distance" between the sublimated person and the ordinary "herd." This gap is in principle unbridgeable: on one side is the mundane and plebian, available and comprehensible to everyone; on the other is the sublime, which is too refined for ordinary people to fully understand or aspire to. The distinction here is analogous to—and sometimes confused with—the distinction between the profane and the sacred. The point of such rhetoric is to get us to perceive either an individual or an elite group as worthy of deference.

From the nineteenth century onward, the widespread transition to democratic governance forced the Right to find new ways to acquire mass support for conservative policies. The rhetoric of sublimation assumed a more demotic tone. Sometimes this meant inviting voters to imagine *themselves* as members of the rarefied class whose privileges were under threat. In his historically important pamphlet "The Interest in Slavery of the Non-Slaveholder," James D. B. De Bow echoed Sen. John Townsend's claim that "the color of the white man is now, in the south, a title of nobility." De Bow pointed out that poor whites in the North are "at the bottom of the social ladder, whilst [their] brother here has ascended several steps and can look down upon those who are beneath him, at an *infinite remove*." Note the spatial metaphor at the end, functioning in much the same way as Nietzsche's "pathos of distance."

Another more demotic version of sublimation rhetoric argues that ordinary men and women live more meaningful and dignified lives by submitting themselves to the authority of more elevated persons; their very submission elevates them above the rabble of a democracy. Joseph de Maistre gave classic expression to this point when he insisted that monarchy "without contradiction" was "the form of government that gives the most distinction to the greatest number of persons." More recently, Alexander Dugin described Eurasian democracy as a system where the people fulfill a glorious "destiny" selected for them by the "single ones." Believe it or not, Donald Trump also tapped into this current in *The Art of the Deal*, nicely highlighting its essential fraudulence. He, or rather his ghostwriter, argued that while many ordinary people may not think "big"

themselves, they are naturally drawn to those who do. A person who does think "big" can find it very easy to persuade others, because he allows them to participate in the "fantasy" he projects—though as followers rather than as equals.

Finally, sublimation is intended to mystify. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke explained that sublime objects are those the ordinary mind tries and fails to comprehend fully; they therefore instill in the perceiver a sense of "awe, reverence, and respect." When attached to persons and institutions, sublime qualities are intended to induce a sense of overpowering reverence and to diminish whatever confidence ordinary people have in their own capacity to critically assess those in power.

Burke knew this idea might appear paradoxical to the modern mind, which requires that all authority be rationally justified and that the justifications be intelligible to everyone. But for Burke, the very effort to justify power publicly is what destroys it, since reason alone will never be enough to get the "swinish multitude" to offer their enduring allegiance and to accept subordination. A politics built on rationality rather than mystification risks turning compliant subjects into demanding citizens. By stripping away "all the pleasing illusions which made power gentle, and obedience liberal," the "new conquering empire of light and reason" tore down "all the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation…. On this scheme of things, a king is but a man, a queen is but a woman." Burke suggests that the wise statesman recognizes the need to foster illusions that can disguise raw power as natural authority.

For centuries, sublimation was the Right's favorite and most frequently deployed rhetorical thesis, but today it has lost much of its appeal. In truth, it was always vulnerable, always the proverbial emperor with no clothes—just another set of fantastic illusions projected onto the all-too-human. This vulnerability is one reason the twenty-first-century Right gets exceptionally shrill when people fail to show the requisite deference to their sublimated better—whether it be a newly crowned seventy-four-year-old king or a tech tycoon.

It is now very easy for progressive critics to deflate the sublimating aspirations of the Right by drawing attention to the very un-sublime realities hidden behind the exercise of power. Behind every proud flag and enchanting palace there is a long history of slavery, colonialism, imperialism, and squalid sex scandals. Historical awareness is the enemy of sublimation. Burke lamented that it was always a tragedy when people inquired too closely into the foundations of commonwealths. For the same reason, Ron DeSantis doesn't want people thinking too much about Black history: it might complicate, or even undermine, their faith in the current distribution of power and wealth. In short, the sublimation thesis may be the most natural fit for the Right, but it is also an easy target for the Left. Hence the Right's turn to an alternative thesis: naturalization.

As Burke, de Maistre, and many other critics of Enlightenment reason understood, the sublime view that a stratified society corresponds to some deeper transcendent hierarchy is difficult to maintain in the face of modern materialism's leveling ontology. This has led many on the political Right to embrace the naturalization thesis as a more plausible defense of privilege and hierarchy, one that actually draws on the prestige of Enlightenment reason rather than reacting against it. Where sublimation appeals to mysterious metaphysical realities to justify inequality, naturalization appeals to empirical facts, or at least pretends to. Some people and groups of people are just demonstrably superior to others, so why should our political institutions pretend otherwise? Inequalities of status, wealth, and power reflect natural inequalities that no viable political order can hope to suppress.

The naturalization thesis is intended to generate a feeling of resignation: *This is just how things are, so we'd all better get used to it*. In this respect, naturalization is quite different from sublimation, which is meant to induce not resignation but reverence and awe. Where sublimation presents itself in the pompous garb of timeless tradition, exponents of the naturalization thesis prefer to pose as icy realists. Not for them the sentimental self-deceptions of utopian egalitarians; they choose instead to look squarely at the reality of the human condition and to set their expectations accordingly. They present their case as something all reasonable people can understand—indeed, as something no reasonable person could disagree with. Sometimes they even express sympathy, real or feigned, with the moral ambitions of the Left, before insisting that such ambitions will forever be frustrated by the world as it is, not as we would like it to be. Thus, they turn the Enlightenment's commitment to reason against its commitment to progress. Progressives, they insist, are no less guilty of mystification than reactionaries are.

Many apologists for capitalist inequality lean heavily on the naturalization thesis. In a monograph titled *Liberalism*, Ludwig von Mises lamented the "sober" fact that "all human power would be insufficient to make men really equal. Men are and will always remain unequal." Elsewhere, he repeats the point that "men are altogether unequal. Even between brothers there exist the most marked differences in physical and mental attributes. Nature never repeats itself in its creations; it produces nothing by the dozen, nor are its products standardized." But von Mises insists that while natural inequalities can never be eradicated, individuals can at least be made equal under the law. This is one of the features that distinguishes capitalism from earlier, more sublimated forms of hierarchy: in a capitalist system "the more gifted and more able have no means to profit from their superiority other than to serve to the best of their abilities the wishes of the majority of the less gifted." Competition in the market will allow unequal human capacities and talents to express themselves and be rewarded according to merit, while also generating value for the rest of society. Von Mises insists that the social and material inequalities that emerge in this situation will be justified because they were not

artificially imposed, but instead reflect natural differences of talent. And this is just the situation we would expect if meddlesome politicians had the courage to tell the "masses" the truth about their natural inferiority: "You are inferior and all the improvement in your conditions which you simply take for granted you owe to the effort of men who are better than you."

The naturalization thesis presents the Right's abstract ideal of social inequality as the default reality and construes deviations from it as either unnatural or impossible. James Fitzjames Stephen gave classic expression to this view in *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*. Responding to John Stuart Mill's arguments for gender equality, Stephen defends patriarchy by claiming that "we cannot imagine the removal" of "differences of age and sex" unless "human nature is radically changed." Here we see how the naturalization thesis can be easily combined with Hirschman's more defensive reactionary theses: the conservative ideologue will present an unequal social order as natural and functional, and then suggest that progressive ambitions to deviate from it constitute a form of "social engineering" that will produce perverse results, prove futile, or jeopardize past achievements. This combination of naturalizing capitalist inequality and deflecting arguments against reform by appeals to perversity, futility, or jeopardy has been common on the American Right at least since Barry Goldwater. In *The Conscience of a Conservative* (1960), Goldwater's ghostwriter naturalized dramatic inequalities of wealth while lamenting "artificial" efforts to correct them:

> The graduated tax is a confiscatory tax. Its effect, and to a large extent its aim is to bring down all men to a common level. Many of the leading proponents of the graduated tax frankly admit that their purpose is to redistribute the nation's wealth. Their aim is an egalitarian society—an objective that does violence both to the charter of the Republic and the laws of Nature. We are all equal in the eyes of God but we are equal in no other respect. Artificial devices for enforcing equality among unequal men must be rejected if we would restore that charter and honor those laws.

The naturalization thesis has generally been a harder one for liberals and progressives to respond to. This is partly because it presents itself as merely describing empirical facts. That means one has to respond to it either by appealing to a different interpretation of those facts or by presenting an entirely different set of facts. What makes things more difficult is that conservatives are often right, at least superficially: there are indeed clear differences in innate human aptitudes and capabilities. Another difficulty for liberals and progressives is that the naturalization thesis can appeal to a certain kind of left-wing, post-structuralist pessimism about how much structural reform is really possible. Centrist liberals have their own version of this tendency. In his new book *Liberalism Against Itself,* Samuel Moyn points out how many Cold War liberals internalized conservative arguments about the impossibility of radically improving society because of the natural imperfections of human nature and knowledge. This transformed American liberalism from a revolutionary creed into a defensive one, as many liberals gradually turned against the ambitions of the New Deal and the Great Society.

Where conservatives go wrong is in obscuring how much freedom we have in deciding how social institutions should respond to natural differences.

But the naturalization thesis is not unanswerable. Where conservatives go wrong is in obscuring how much freedom we have in deciding how social institutions should respond to natural differences of talent and capability. For instance, a society may decide there is nothing that can be done for infants born with advanced genetic disabilities. One could even surround this cruel choice with naturalizing rhetoric about the unfairness of the genetic lottery. Or, instead, we could choose to allocate public resources in order to secure a decent and fulfilling life for children with disabilities. As John Rawls eloquently put it in *A Theory of Justice*:

> We may reject the contention that the ordering of institutions is always defective because the distribution of natural talents and the contingencies of social circumstance are unjust, and this injustice must inevitably carryover to human arrangements. Occasionally this reflection is offered as an excuse for ignoring injustice, as if the refusal to acquiesce in injustice is on a par with being unable to accept death. The natural distribution is neither just nor unjust; nor is it unjust that persons are born into society at some particular position. These are simply natural facts. What is just and unjust is the way that institutions deal with these facts.

Of course, the sublimation thesis and the naturalization thesis are not mutually exclusive. One often sees the less scrupulous propagandists of the Right trying to combine the two, so that they can appear both more in touch with transcendent wisdom and more worldly-wise than progressives, who are caricatured as both nihilistic and naïve. But regardless of the exact proportions of the two kinds of rhetoric, the result is intended to be the same: those individuals or classes whom the Right regards as manifestly superior are entitled to more status, more power, more wealth, and more donations for their legal-defense funds. While often presented as the fruit of deep reflection, these claims are often just opportunistic obscurantism. As long as it produces the right conclusion, any reason will do. Of course, that doesn't mean their reasons are totally without merit: natural inequalities are real, and however we respond to them, we'll never succeed in making a morally perfect world. Still, there can be a better world than the one conservatives offer. Progressives are not necessarily perfectionists; they recognize the tragic dimensions of the human condition. But they also refuse to allow either hallowed tradition or capricious nature to set the limits of justice.

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Jacques Ellul in his house in Pessac, France, December 1990

More than Machines

Nolen Gertz

Jacques Ellul on AI's real threat to humanity

The Writers Guild of America—the labor union of Hollywood's screenwriters—recently voted to strike in part because television and film studios wouldn't negotiate limits on the use of AI to write scripts. Reducing a room full of writers to one "writer," whose job would no longer be to actually *write* but to prompt and edit the output of an AI program like ChatGPT, would of course save studios a lot of money. But that money would be saved at the expense of both the humans replaced by AI and the humans whose entertainment would be created by it. If audiences are already complaining that shows and movies are too formulaic and repetitive, how much angrier would they be if Hollywood produced *only* "content" constructed out of the rearranged pieces of already existing shows and movies? The writers' strike can therefore be seen as not only a move to protect jobs in Hollywood, but, in a sense, to protect Hollywood itself.

JAN VAN BOECKEL, RERUN PRODUCTIONS/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

At the same time, teachers at schools and universities are scrambling to adapt to the threat of ChatGPT and other increasingly ubiquitous and difficult-to-detect "generative AI" programs. It's unclear how to evaluate homework when teachers can no longer know for certain whether students are the real authors of their work. On the traditionalist side of the debate, there are calls to fight AI by turning to oral exams and in-class, on-paper writing assignments. On the more progressive side, there are calls to embrace it by explicitly asking students to use ChatGPT as part of the writing process. Students would learn how best to prompt ChatGPT to write essays that they would then assess and edit. If the AI we use to detect plagiarism cannot keep up with the AI that plagiarizes, then embracing AI seems to many administrators and instructors a better solution than waging a hopeless war against it. Then again, if Hollywood writers would rather strike than work with AI, then asking students to work with it might be regarded as preparing them for jobs no one really wants in a world no one really wants.

Do we really have no choice beyond this binary: to either fight AI or embrace it? If fighting AI seems self-defeating and embracing it self-destructive, then why are we letting tech companies continue to develop ever more powerful AI programs? And if even the CEOs of these tech companies are worried about the potential threat to humanity, then why should we continue to pursue AI at all? Of course, it could be argued that the fears concerning AI are either the result of misunderstanding or mere hype designed to make AI seem more powerful than it really is. Is AI really a threat to humanity? Or is it just a complex—and scary-seeming—tool that, like any other tool, is designed to make life a little bit easier?

A compelling answer to these questions comes from the work of an intellectual who died long before ChatGPT, or even AI, came into existence. Jacques Ellul (1912–1994) was a French philosopher, sociologist, theologian, and professor who authored more than fifty books covering topics such as politics, propaganda, violence, and Christianity. In a recent book about the life and work of Ellul, Jacob E. Van Vleet and Jacob Marques Rollison argue that Ellul's writings can be separated into two strands: sociological and theological. Alternatively, these two strands can be labeled as pessimistic and optimistic, for while his sociological texts have led academics to dismiss Ellul as a dystopian fatalist, his largely overlooked theological texts instead center on hope and the need for political engagement. Most importantly for our purposes, Ellul's work in the 1950s focused on the growing concern about the relationship between technology and society.

To be more precise, he wrote about the relationship between "technique" and society. Owing to the complications of trying to translate French into English, "technique," a central concept in Ellul's work, has been rendered sometimes accurately, and sometimes misleadingly, as "technology." In fact, the difficulty of differentiating the concept of "technique" from "technology" could itself be seen as the result of precisely the kind of problem Ellul was trying to illuminate in his work.

Efficiency is pursued not in accordance with our values, but rather because efficiency has itself become the value by which everything is judged.

According to Ellul, we are living in a technological world not only because tech is everywhere but because we are living in a world of *technique*. By "technique," Ellul referred broadly to the way we accomplish tasks. In the opening of his 1954 work *The Technological Society*, Ellul defined "technique" as "the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity." Painters use different techniques for painting, chefs have techniques for cooking, comedians have techniques for telling jokes, and so on. But an increasing focus on *how* things are done rather than *why* they are done, Ellul argued, means that the idea of having different techniques for different goals is giving way. Instead, optimizers simply try to figure out how every task can be accomplished in the most *efficient* way possible. As Ellul put it, "The technological phenomenon is the preoccupation of the great majority the men of our day to seek out in all things the absolutely most efficient method."

This concerned Ellul because efficiency is pursued not in accordance with our values, but rather because efficiency has itself become the value by which everything is judged. In other words, we judge whether something is good based on how efficient it is, because *good* and *bad* have come to mean nothing other than *efficient* and *inefficient*. "Good" workers—for example, Hollywood screenwriters—are now more likely to be judged by how efficiently they produce profit-making work than by the quality—the aesthetic merit in this case—of that work.

Machines, according to Ellul, are the ideal embodiment of technique because they are designed for efficiency: they do nothing but perform the desired activity in the shortest possible time with the least possible effort.

According to the ideal of technique, the activity itself—its human meaning and rationale, the tradition behind it—does not matter. What matters is that a machine can seemingly perform any activity in the most efficient way possible. In a society driven by technique, which has thrown over all other values, the most important activity a machine can perform becomes the production of more and better machines. Factories are thus often made up of machines that make little else but parts to make more machines. We come to want machines to do every activity, and we come to see every activity as something a machine could do better—that is, more efficiently—than any human being.

In theory, the more chores machines can complete for humanity, the more we humans should be free from toil and able to use our time for more meaningful activities. In practice, however, as Ellul pointed out, humans are not liberated by machines; instead of machines working for us, we often find that we are forced to work for machines. As Ellul writes in 1977's *The Technological System*:

> In reality, for most workers, technological growth brings harder and more exhausting work (speeds, for instance, demanded not by the capitalist but by technology and the service owed to the machine). We are intoxicated with the idea of leisure and universal automation. But for a long time, we will be stuck with work, we will be wasted and alienated. Alienation, though, is no longer capitalistic, it is now technological.

We have been subordinated to machines not because, as in science-fiction dystopias, they have risen up and taken over the world, but for a much more mundane reason: machines only work as long as humans keep them working. Machines never function as smoothly as promised, since they are made up of complicated moving parts, which frequently require human intervention to prevent them from malfunctioning, wearing out, and breaking down.

The more tasks that are taken over by machines, the more vital it becomes that we are able to keep machines functioning well. To live surrounded by machines, one has to learn how to take care of them, and so education has increasingly become focused on how to build machines, how to maintain machines, and how to repair machines. It would come as no surprise to Ellul that education focused on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (the so-called "STEM" fields) has come to replace traditional education focused on the humanities. Learning about anything other than STEM has come to be seen as antiquated, belonging to a world we no longer inhabit, preparing students for jobs that no longer exist.

Once we reduce all education to STEM, according to Ellul, we lose the ability to make any value judgments about machines other than those having to do with their efficiency. Worse yet, we tend not to see this as a danger because we do not think machines *should* be judged except based on their efficiency. Since we see machines as mere means to human ends, we think human ends are what should be judged, not the means we use to achieve those ends. Thus we find calls to develop, for example, "Drones for Good" as if the intentions of the drone operators alone determine whether drone technology is "good." Such sentiment fails to recognize the way merely operating a drone, like holding a gun, is likely to alter how we see the world and thus reshape our intentions.

Tools, it is repeatedly said, are not good or evil; only humans and human actions are. What matters is how people use tools, not the tools themselves. But if we value efficiency over any other goals and if we use machines to create more and better machines, then machines are not mere means; they are ends in themselves. This is why Ellul argued that machines have become autonomous while humans have lost our autonomy. The progress of technology is seen as inevitable and unquestionable because it is equated with human progress. As Ellul put it, "Each [new] technological element is first adapted to the technological system, and it is in respect to this system that the element has its true functionality, far more so than in respect to a human need or social order."

Machines have become so integral to human life that we cannot even make decisions for ourselves without the intervention of machines. Scientific knowledge depends on experiments and so scientific knowledge can only develop in accordance with the development of experimental equipment. Mathematical knowledge depends on calculations and so mathematical knowledge can only develop in accordance with the development of calculating devices. Military power depends on weapons and intelligence and so military power depends upon the development of military technology. Consequently, decision-making based on the knowledge produced in these areas depends on machines. Ellul argued that politicians cannot intervene in technological development without putting the security of the state at risk, and so political power no longer rests with politicians, but with *technicians*.

> All the theorists, politicians, partisans, and philosophers agree on a simple view: The state decides, technology obeys. And even more, that is how it must be, it is the true recourse against technology. In contrast, however, we have to ask who in the state intervenes, and how the state intervenes, i.e., how a decision is reached and by whom in reality, not in the idealist version. We then learn that technicians are at the origin of political decisions.

Only those who best understand technology have real political power in a technological society. Does this technological domination of politics imply "the emergence of a technocracy"? Perhaps surprisingly, Ellul answers no:

> Absolutely not in the sense of a political power directly exercised by technicians, and not in the sense of technicians' desire to exercise power. The latter aspect is practically without interest. There are very few technicians who wish to have political power.

Technicians are far more interested in money than power.

But politicians are left incapable of judging technological progress without seeking the advice of people with technological understanding, and so politicians cannot regulate tech companies without the help of the very tech companies they are trying to regulate. We've seen this dynamic play out time and again in Washington: Congress holds hearings about excesses and abuses in the tech industry, but members of Congress demonstrate a poor grasp of the issues involved and the prospects for regulation come to depend entirely on industry insiders and lobbyists.

Consequently, according to Ellul, technological progress has resulted in the death of democracy. But this does not mean that technocracy, in the sense of rule by experts, has risen up to take its place. Instead, Ellul argued that not even the experts are in control. There is a power vacuum in technological societies, with neither a democracy nor a technocracy in place. We try to fill this power vacuum with more and more *bureaucracy*, and so it might seem like we are living in a technocracy. But, in reality, our political decisions are merely carried out by humans trying their best to act like machines while making decisions based on information gathered by machines. As Ellul put it,

> [P]eople see a technician sitting in the government minister's chair. But under the influence of technology, it is the entire state that is modified. One can say that there will soon be no more (and indeed less and less) political power (with all its contents: ideology, authority, the power of man over man, etc.). We are watching the birth of a new technological state, which is anything but a technocracy; this new state has chiefly technological functions, a technological organization, and a rationalized system of decision-making.

Ellul presents us with the prospect of a world where ends don't justify means, but means justify ends—where we don't rely on values to debate and determine societal goals, but let the development of new tools determine what tasks are worth achieving. With this understanding of our technological world, we can begin to answer the questions I posed at the outset. From Ellul's viewpoint, it is no surprise that we are today pursuing AI as a potential solution to social problems, while at the same time worrying about a host of new, perhaps even worse problems that it may cause. It is a perfectly predictable outcome of our single-minded focus on technique and efficiency.

Take our confusion about what precisely AI is—whether it is able to actually understand what it creates or if it merely appears to understand. From an Ellulian perspective, this can be construed as the result of our inability to determine any longer whether we ourselves understand what we create or merely appear to understand. By reducing our projects to a series of tasks that can be achieved by either humans or machines, we cannot help but compare ourselves to machines. Valuing efficiency above all else, we come to see humanity as an inferior kind of machine. At the same time, we have begun defining humanity solely in terms of what humans can do and machines cannot—thinking, feeling, and creating. But since we see even these achievements as mere tasks, the line between humans and machines has become increasingly blurry: tasks that only humans can do have come to be seen as tasks that only humans can do *for now*.

The reduction of human actions to mere tasks means that whether or not machines are becoming more like humans, humans are becoming more like machines.

From Ellul's perspective, the question of whether machines can think, feel, or create is not what we should worry about. The reduction of human actions to mere tasks means that whether or not machines are becoming more like humans, *humans are becoming more like machines*. To see thinking, feeling, and creating as tasks is to see such activities as means to ends rather than as ends in themselves. If we adopt this instrumentalist perspective, we have already conceded that machines are our equals. Thinking, on this view, can only be thinking about how to achieve some task, and so, of course, machines can think because they can process and execute commands. Likewise, machines can feel and create because these human activities have similarly been reduced to instrumental processes defined by their efficiencies and outputs, which machines can replicate and even, increasingly, exceed.

For Ellul, then, the challenge posed to humanity's value by technique and its "absolute," efficiency-obsessed form of rationality has become all-important. He writes:

> The computer faces us squarely with the contradiction already announced throughout the technological movement and brought to its complete rigor—between the rational (problems posed because of the computer and the answers given) and the irrational (human attitudes and tendencies). The computer glaringly exposes anything irrational in a human decision, showing that a choice considered reasonable is actually emotional. It does not allow that this is translation into an absolute rationality; but plainly, this conflict introduces man into a cultural universe that is different from anything he has ever

The question of whether we can make AI align with human values ignores the fact that our current "human values" are what gave rise to AI in the first place. The question we should be asking is whether we can make "human values" align with our humanity.

> known before. Man's central, his—I might say—metaphysical problem is no longer the existence of God and his own existence in terms of that sacred mystery. The problem is now the conflict between that absolute rationality and what has hitherto constituted his person. That is the pivot of all present-day reflection, and, for a long time, it will remain the only philosophical issue.

In a world governed by absolute rationality of this kind, it should come as no surprise that students see generative AI programs like ChatGPT as tools they should take advantage of. It is less efficient to write a paper oneself than to have a computer do the writing for you, just as writing by hand is less efficient than typing. Furthermore, since writing papers is a means to getting a degree, getting a degree a means to getting a job, and getting a job a means to making money, then students will likely see using ChatGPT in school as the most efficient way to prepare for their future jobs, just as their future employer will see it as a more efficient way to make money. That ChatGPT may be generating what seem like academic papers but are instead merely words and sentences strung together based on statistical probabilities is not important, since the student does not see academic papers as important in themselves. Valuing efficiency above all else means that what matters is entirely extrinsic—that a given task was completed—and not intrinsic—whether the task was completed well. If it was done quickly and easily then, from the perspective of technique, the task was completed well.

From Ellul's point of view, we should be less concerned about the threat of AI than about the far more fundamental threat of technique. So long as we view human activity as a mere series of tasks and we value, above all else, the completion of these tasks in the most efficient way possible, we will continue to see AI as both inevitable and desirable. We will become increasingly dependent upon AI while also increasingly unable to understand it. But these drawbacks, if they are considered at all, will be construed as costs far outweighed by the benefits of AI. The question, then, of whether we can make AI align with human values ignores the fact that human values, as they are constituted today, have given rise to AI in the first place. The question we should be asking is whether we can make "human values" align with our humanity.

Ellul is often misread as a dystopian thinker who claimed that we are powerless to stop technology because of "technological determinism," which has made human freedom a thing of the past. For this reason, he has been criticized by philosophers of technology like Andrew Feenberg for having supposedly neglected the fact that technological progress is driven by human decisions. But Ellul's pessimism derives instead precisely from his awareness that human decisions are driving technological progress. Ellul didn't suggest it is not possible to make different decisions, but rather challenged us to ask ourselves what it would take for us to do so. If valuing efficiency has created a world where technological progress seems inevitable while human progress seems to be in jeopardy, will we recognize the inhuman world we have created and choose to embrace different, more human values?

Ellul thought there were three ways we could become free from the world that technique has created. First, there could be a nuclear war that would either end the world altogether, or at least end the world's dependence on technology. Second, there could be divine intervention from God. Third, we could wake up and see the reality we have created for what it is. We could come to see that we are not being liberated by new technologies, nor made happier, and start to create a new, better reality concerned more with embracing what it means to be human rather than with the perceived benefits of reducing humans to mere means.

It was the possibility of the third option that motivated Ellul to write rather than resign himself to despair. And it is the possibility of the third option that should motivate us today to read Ellul rather than give up and ask ChatGPT to summarize Ellul for us.

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DISAPPOINTING OUR FATHERS

Gary Stein

When I announced my leaving to study poetry
you said, fine, but remember you can't eat words.
Maybe you expected me to live on your diet
of numbers, to live in a world as true as a wall
or floor. Measure twice, cut once, you said.

Maybe that's how you love a son. Give him
a solid geometry to hold in his hand,
a way to build what people will buy. In the end
you set me loose to the images in my head
that turned into piles of paper in a drawer.

Isn't the earth numberless and older than science?
God with no T-square, no level, just eyeballed
creation, starting with nothing but a Word.
Do you think He ached when His son fled carpentry,
just to die for the abstract sins of strangers?

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.*

Wild Facts

Carlos Eire

How should historians deal with levitating saints?

"While strolling in the garden one day…a priest said to him, 'Father Joseph, oh, how beautiful God has made heaven!' Then Joseph, as if he had been called to heaven, gave a loud shriek, leapt off the ground, flew through the air, and knelt down atop an olive tree, and—as witnesses declared in his beatification inquest—that branch on which he rested waved as if a bird were perched upon it, and he remained up there about half an hour" (Paolo Agelli, *Vita del Beato Giuseppe di Copertino*, 1753).

What kind of nonsense is this? Who is this liar quoted above? Human beings can't fly or kneel on slender tree limbs like little birds. So, how is it that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—the very era that gave birth to aggressive skepticism and empirical science—countless people swore that they had witnessed such events? And how is it that some of these sworn testimonies are legal records, archived alongside lawsuits and murder trials, from all sorts of people, not just illiterate peasants but also elites at the apex of the social, intellectual, and political hierarchy?

Reports of flying or hovering humans reached a peak at the dawn of modernity, along with reports of other phenomena also deemed impossible by many in our own day and by some doubters back then. Unlike spontaneous healing miracles, which really do occur with some frequency, levitations and bilocations are extremely rare events that are seldom taken seriously outside certain belief systems. They are but two of several physical phenomena that have been linked to mystical ecstasy in various cultures and religions around the world for thousands of years. They are also among the oddest of wonders, not just because they seem to happen infrequently but also because they appear to serve no practical purpose other than confirming the special status of the person who levitates or bilocates. In a religious context—and most accounts of levitations and bilocations have religious origins—the unseen force is usually ascribed to some higher being, but it can also be ascribed to the levitators and bilocators themselves, who are so obviously unlike most of their fellow human beings, for whom the tug of gravity within a single location is inescapable. In Christianity, that higher being could be God or the devil, and levitators could be viewed as either holy or diabolical, or, in some cases, as clever frauds. As awesome displays of raw unnatural power, the phenomena of levitation and bilocation have few equals.

But how is it possible to speak about something that can't possibly happen? Acts of levitation or bilocation are "wild facts," to use a term coined by William James over a century ago. As he defined it, a wild fact is any occurrence that has "no stall or pigeonhole" into which "the ordinary and critical mind" can fit it. The alterity of any such phenomenon is so extreme, said James, that it becomes "unclassifiable" as well as an unimaginable "paradoxical absurdity" that must be considered inherently *untrue* as well as impossible. Such wild facts puzzle scientists so much, he observed, that they "always prove more easy to ignore than to attend to." James was intensely interested in psychic and mystical phenomena and greatly pained by the dismissive attitude his fellow scientists displayed toward these phenomena. Most of them, he quipped, thought that passing "from mystical to scientific speculations is like passing from lunacy to sanity."

The situation James described long ago has not changed much, and in some respects has worsened for anyone who wants to take wild facts such as levitation and bilocation seriously. This leaves the historian or anyone with a critical mind in a tight spot. If wild facts are "paradoxical absurdities," are there any facts whatsoever left to study? The answer is yes. The fact we can explore is not the act of levitation itself, the wild fact that is inaccessible to us. The fact we can deal with is the testimony. This issue is as brutally simple as it is brutally circumscribed: since we have no films or photographs to analyze for authenticity with the latest cutting-edge technology, all we have is the fact that thousands of testimonies exist in which human beings swore they saw another human being hover or fly, or suddenly materialize in some other location. Conse-

A 1693 engraving of St. Ignatius of Loyola levitating, Episcopal Library, Barcelona, Spain

ALBUM/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

quently, a history of the impossible is a history of *testimonies* about impossible events. Our dominant culture dismisses these testimonies as unbelievable and merely "anecdotal"—that is, as accounts that have no point of reference beyond themselves, no wider context, and little or no credibility. So why not call it a history of lying, a history of hallucinations, or a history of the ridiculous? Because the testimonies themselves self-consciously accept the impossible event as impossible, as well as bafflingly and utterly real—even terrifying—and of great significance. Moreover, the sheer number of such testimonies is so relatively large, so widespread across time and geographical boundaries, and so closely linked to civil and ecclesiastical institutions that they most certainly *do* have a broader context into which they fit. And that is a very rare and credible kind of evidence, as unique as the events confirmed by it.

Within the Catholic tradition, levitation and bilocation have an immensely rich history.

Levitation is one of the best of all entry points into the history of the impossible, principally because it is an event for which we have an overabundance of testimonies, not just in Western Christianity but throughout all of world history. Yet levitation is still a subject that attracts disparagement and repels serious inquiry: the very claim that any human being can defy the laws of gravity seems way too absurd nowadays, more than two centuries after Newton, despite the existence of high-speed trains that employ magnetic levitation to hover and fly forward while suspended just a few centimeters above their tracks. Human levitation seems incompatible with seriousness. Even a crank such as Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo, a Spanish historian who eagerly defended absurd notions—including the claim that Catholic orthodoxy was genetically transmitted among pure-blooded Spaniards—had no patience with levitation and other physical phenomena associated with mystical ecstasy. What this most unreasonable man had to say long ago about levitation and other related phenomena, such as stigmata, is still very much in line with prevailing thought: "Leave all these cases lying in oblivion. Let them be brought to light, in due course, by those who are researching folk customs, or those who wish to satisfy a childish sort of curiosity."

Bilocation is another entry point into the history of the impossible and another subject that Menéndez y Pelayo would have wanted to sink into oblivion. Like levitation, it is a phenomenon found in many religions and cultures from ancient times to the present. But, like levitation, it seems incompatible with seriousness, and therefore it receives an equal amount of disrespect and contemptuous dismissals. Testimonies of bilocations are fewer in number than those of levitations in Christian history, and the phenomenon is impossible in a double way: not just as something that "cannot" happen but also as something that no one can ever witness in both locations simultaneously. Verifying its occurrence requires

matching up eyewitness accounts from different locations *ex post facto*, something that makes all testimonies less immediate and therefore more open to the likelihood of fraud. But there is no denying the fact that such corroborations have been recorded and accepted as factual, as in the case of the bilocation of St. Ignatius Loyola to the bedside of the ailing Alexander Petronius.

If the past itself includes bizarre events and beliefs, are these to be dismissed simply because they seem illogical or because our current frame of reference differs so much from that of previous centuries? The easiest path is to say, yes, of course. But a wiser path to take might be to say, no, of course not. As Lucien Febvre, a very savvy historian, once said: "To comprehend is not to clarify, simplify, or to reduce things to a perfectly clear logical scheme. To comprehend is to complicate, to augment in depth. It is to widen on all sides. It is to vivify." And this vivifying requires not only embracing what might seem strange in the past but accepting the strangeness as an essential rational feature of the past, not as something irrational. As Darren Oldridge has observed: "However peculiar they now seem, the beliefs of pre-modern people were normally a rational response to the intellectual and social context in which they were expressed."

Levitations are among the most ambiguous of mystical phenomena in Catholic Christianity for two reasons: because of the belief that they can be caused by the devil rather than God and because of the fact that they can also be faked and have been regularly faked for millennia by all sorts of wizards and hucksters. Contrived acts of levitation performed under tightly controlled conditions can seem real indeed when those performing them are experts at creating illusions and at fooling their audience's senses. It matters little if the illusion is performed on a stage as entertainment or in a chapel or some dimly lit parlor as deceit. Reports of bilocations are even more vulnerable to dismissal than levitations. To fake a bilocation seems easy enough. All one needs to do is to recruit or bribe expert liars at both locations. Consequently, believing in reports of bilocations requires a more intense leap of faith than believing in levitations.

The likelihood of deceit haunts levitations and bilocations in yet another way, for not too long ago these phenomena became intensely linked with ghosts and spirits rather than God or the devil. This happened due to a rise in popularity of the quasi-religious occult movement known as Spiritualism, which spread like wildfire across North and South America, Europe, and other corners of the Western world between the 1860s and the 1920s. Spiritualism had its detractors, for sure, especially among the Christian clergy, professional illusionists, and an array of skeptics, but it was not restricted to quirky outcasts on the margins of respectability. Quite the contrary. As hard as it might be to imagine nowadays, Spiritualism attracted a broad spectrum of devotees, some of whom belonged to the upper echelons of society, such as the eminent chemist and physicist Sir William Crookes; novelist Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of the hyper-rational and immensely popular fictional character Sherlock Holmes; evolutionary biologist Alfred Russel Wallace, Charles Darwin's closest collaborator and competitor; the Nobel laureates Pierre and Marie Curie, pioneers in the study of radiation; and Mary Todd Lincoln, the wife of American president Abraham Lincoln, who regularly held séances at the White House.

The term "levitation" was coined by spiritualists in the nineteenth century. Although accounts of hovering or flying men and women stretch back to antiquity, no specific term had ever been applied to the phenomenon. But, given its centrality in spiritualist ritual, especially during séances at which mediums levitated objects, their own bodies, or those of others—ostensibly through the agency of spirits—the amazing feat needed a name, and "levitation" seemed to suit the cult's quasi-scientific needs perfectly. Derived as it was from the Latin *levitas,* or "lightness," the exact opposite of "gravitas," or "heaviness," the newly minted term had a distinctly Newtonian feel to it, evoking his law of universal gravitation and empirical objectivity while conveying a sense of the mysteriously spiritual and otherworldly. "Bilocation" was another quasi-scientific term favored by spiritualists, who believed that the human body had an "astral double," a spiritual component that could leave the physical body and appear elsewhere.

Spiritualism never disappeared completely. In fact, the ever-popular Ouija board, still a best-selling game, made and marketed as a toy by Hasbro, the same company that makes Monopoly, is a spiritualist device. But as Spiritualism's heyday waned, so did interest in levitation and bilocation. By 1928, when Olivier Leroy published the one and only comprehensive history of levitation written in the twentieth century, the popularity of Spiritualism was already fading fast. And no comparable effort was ever made to cover the history of bilocation. Doyle, who died in 1930, seemed to embody the cult's decline in his final years. His zealous defense of communication with the dead and of photographs of ghosts and fairies had by then become more of a disposable Victorian curiosity than a set of beliefs to embrace, and since levitation and bilocation were part of the spiritualist package deal, they, too, gradually vanished into the cobwebbed attic of the public's imagination.

Levitation and bilocation might have had a shady lineage to overcome, but they nonetheless had—and continue to have—a very different past upon which to claim legitimate significance. Within the Catholic tradition, levitation and bilocation have an immensely rich history, especially in the lives of the saints. Because holy levitation and bilocation are considered miracles in Catholicism—that is, supernatural gifts, or "charisms," that accompany mystical ecstasy and can be markers of exceptional sanctity—they have never completely lost their luster and are not likely to lose it. The Greek term *charisma* denotes any gift bestowed on humans through God 's benevolent love (*charis*). Belief in such gifts is as old as Christianity itself and

was initially given theological shape by the apostle Paul, who delineated their function in the shaping of the Church:

> There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord who works all things in all. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines. (Corinthians 12:4–11)

Among such extraordinary supernatural gifts, some not mentioned by Paul were later recognized as legitimate, including levitation, bilocation, and several others that accompanied mystical ecstasy. During the Middle Ages, a long list of these divine mystical gifts evolved, especially through the process of evaluating the holiness of candidates for sainthood and of writing narratives of their lives as part of that process. By the thirteenth century, when bilocation and levitation accounts begin to appear regularly in Western hagiographies, many supernatural phenomena were believed to be definite signs of sainthood, but there was no fixed list of the miraculous physical phenomena that could accompany mystical ecstasy in the life of any saint. Much in the same way that a medical text might contain lists of all the known symptoms for specific maladies, this list of miraculous mystical gifts or charisma would have simply catalogued those known to occur, but the *primary* characteristic of holiness was always a virtuous life, rather than any miraculous mystical phenomena—those were just a bonus. In the seventeenth century, this attitude deepened in the Catholic Church as the process of canonization was revamped and "heroic virtue" came to be emphasized more than miracles.

No holy mystic was ever expected to have all the charisms that could be listed, and these charisms could manifest themselves in varying degrees: some saints could levitate more often or higher than others; some might just hover; others might actually fly. All these gifts were wild cards of sorts, and so were the particular combinations any mystic might be dealt by God. The most significant of these charisms could be sorted into two categories: first, those phenomena that were overtly physical and visibly involved the body; second, those phenomena that were not visible but could be conjoined with mystical ecstasy.

In the first category, there were at least fifteen overtly physical phenomena commonly linked with holiness and mystical experiences. *Visible ecstasies, raptures, and trances*: when the body enters a cataleptic state and becomes rigid, insensible, and oblivious to its surroundings. *Levitation*: when the body rises up in the air, hovers, or flies. *Weightlessness*: when the body displays a total or nearly total absence of weight during trances and levitations or after death. *Transvection*: when the body is transported through the air from one location to another in some indeterminate measure of time. *Mystical transport or teleportation*: when the body transverses physical space instantaneously, moving from one place to another without any time having elapsed, sometimes over great distances. *Bilocation*: when the body is present in two places simultaneously. *Stigmatization*: when the body acquires the five wounds of the crucified Christ or other wounds inflicted during his passion. *Luminous irradiance*: when the body glows brightly. *Supernatural hyperosmia*: a heightened sense of smell that allows the mystic to detect the sins of others. *Supernatural inedia:* the ability to survive without any food or with very little food at all. *Supernatural insomnia*: the ability to survive without much, if any, sleep. *Visible demonic molestations*: physical attacks by demons that wound the body. *Odor of sanctity*: when the body emits a unique and immensely pleasant smell. *Supernatural incorruption*: when the corpse of a saint does not decompose but remains unnaturally intact for many years, decades, or centuries. *Supernatural oozing, or myroblitism*: when the corpse of a saint discharges a pleasant-smelling oily substance capable of performing healing miracles directly or through cloths dipped in it.

And in the second category, holy mystics could have at least ten different kinds of otherworldly experiences not visible to others or supernatural powers with which they could be imbued. Some of these were physical gifts, some spiritual, and some mental. *Visions, locutions, and apparitions*: when the mystic has various sorts of encounters with the divine that are not visible to others, and the mystic receives communications from God that are visual, aural, or purely spiritual. *Invisible demonic molestations*: when the mystic is assailed by demons spiritually or mentally, sometimes with a visual component that is invisible to others. *Telekinesis*: the ability to move objects at a distance by nonphysical means, without touching them. *Telepathy*: the ability to read the minds and consciences of others or to communicate mentally. *Prophecy*: the ability to know and predict future events accurately, including one's own death. *Supernatural remote vision*: the ability to see events that are occurring elsewhere. S*upernatural dreams*: the ability to receive divine communications while sleeping. *Infused knowledge*: learning directly from God, without formal education, through ecstasies, visions, locutions, and apparitions. *Supernatural control over nature*: the ability to command the behavior of weather, fauna, and flora and to communicate with animals. *Discernment of spirits*: the ability to distinguish whether any event is of divine or demonic origin.

Tellingly, only one of the phenomena listed above can be called genuinely and exclusively Christian: that of the stigmata, the miraculous duplication of the wounds of Christ on the mystic's hands, feet, and torso, the first recorded instance of which involves St. Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth century. All other physical phenomena can be found in accounts from other cultures and religions, in which such gifts are linked to individuals with spiritual powers.

Whether it was being grilled by the Inquisition, being confined to a small monastic cell like a prisoner, or having one's writings destroyed or hidden away under lock and key, miracle-workers usually had to be refined in some sort of crucible.

Naturally, fraud and delusion could certainly be involved in claims about such charisma and the miracles associated with them, and the likelihood of that could be obvious to anyone, but in cultures where such phenomena were assumed to be possible, it was *belief* in the charismata that had to be suspended rather than *disbelief*.

Accepting these phenomena as possible requires a certain way of thinking about the fabric of reality. It requires accepting as fact that the cosmos consists of two dimensions, the natural and the supernatural, and that these two dimensions, though distinct, are nevertheless intertwined in such a way that the natural is always subordinate to the supernatural. In this mentality or worldview, which was reinforced culturally by social custom and the political forces of church and state, the natural order could be constantly interrupted and overpowered by the supernatural. Any such irruption of the supernatural was a miracle (*miraculum* or *prodigium*), and the natural world constantly pulsated with the possibility of the miraculous.

This binary approach to reality extended to the human being, for humans were believed to have been created in "the image and likeness of God" and to be composed of a mortal material body and an immortal spiritual soul. Saints could tap into the supernatural because they were "holy"—that is, they were more spiritual than other human beings, more attuned to the sacred and divine. As individuals who embraced self-denial and focused intensely on spiritual realities rather than on the needs of their corruptible material bodies, they were able to avoid sinful behavior and live virtuous lives. This made them "holy" and therefore closer to God, and that closeness transformed their mortal bodies, imbuing them with supernatural abilities.

Such abilities were deemed celestial in origin: charisma granted to holy human beings in and through whom God worked miracles. Some of these charismata had dark parallels in pagan magic and witchcraft, so discerning the actual source of the gift was always necessary for Catholic Christians, and that process of discernment could be immensely complicated, awkward, and often painful. In essence, the process involved reckoning the difference between *religion*—that is, whatever was truly supernatural—and *magic,* which was never truly supernatural but rather involved the diabolical agency or some sort of humanly devised trickery.

Given this conundrum, and the inherent instability and ambiguity of the miraculous, every levitation or bilocation—no matter how wondrous—had an unavoidable tragic dimension, and all miracle-workers had to contend with it in various ways. The more extreme the miracle claim, the worse the ordeal that the miracle-worker had to face. Whether it was being grilled by the Inquisition, being confined to a small monastic cell like a prisoner, or having one's writings destroyed or hidden away under lock and key, miracle-workers usually had to be refined in some sort of crucible. Magic, religion, and the demonic were too closely intertwined to allow Church authorities to approve of miracles instantaneously. Distinctions had to be maintained, and those distinctions were understood in precise terms by educated folk, especially the clergy tasked with the job of doing the discerning. But at street level, among the faithful, the line between religion and magic was anything but precise, especially when it came to popular piety and the ways in which most Christians approached what they believed to be supernatural.

The advent of the Protestant Reformation brought about a sudden redefinition of concepts such as *religion*, *magic*, *superstition,* and *idolatry,* as well as of assumptions about the relation between the natural and supernatural realms. Distinctions that had reigned largely uncontested in the Catholic Church of the West and the Orthodox Churches of the East since the first century suddenly began to be challenged in the early 1520s when an earth-shaking paradigm shift took place. The change in thinking resulting from this new Protestant take on reality was similar in scope and significance to the one caused by Copernicus in astronomy, but its impact was much more immediate and widespread. It gave rise to a disparate mentality that still saw reality in binary terms but drew the line between religion and magic differently, rejecting the intense intermingling of the natural and supernatural as well as of the material and the spiritual, thus placing much of Catholic ritual and piety in the realm of magic. Moreover, this Protestant mentality also redefined the concepts of *holiness* and *sainthood,* and rejected the assumption that self-denial and virtuous behavior could allow human beings to be gifted with supernatural powers.

As if this were not enough of an assault on medieval assumptions about the relation between the natural and the supernatural realms, Protestants of all stripes also rejected the proposition that God had continued to perform miracles beyond the first century, a doctrine that came to be known as "the cessation of miracles" or "the cessation of the charismata." The miracles mentioned in the Bible had really occurred, they argued, but such marvels became unnecessary after the birth of the early Church and would never happen again. Consequently, all of those miraculous supernatural phenomena associated with holiness throughout the Middle Ages, including levitation, could not be the work of God. But by

designating these phenomena "false"—that is, not attributable to God—Protestants did not declare them impossible. As most Protestant Reformers and their later disciples saw it, ecstatic seizures, levitations, luminous irradiance, and all such phenomena did in fact occur, but they were all diabolical in origin.

Given the religious, social, political, and intellectual turmoil caused by the advent of Protestantism and its great paradigm shift, it is not at all surprising that miracles became a marker of difference between Catholics and Protestants, as well as a flash point of discord and a polemical weapon. For Catholics, holy levitation could serve as proof of the divine source of their Church's authority and of the truth of their teachings and sacraments. If miracles such as this occurred in the Catholic Church, could it really be the seat of the Antichrist, as Protestants argued? Protestants simply countered by insisting that if such weird phenomena were not fraudulent, they could only be demonic, their existence damning evidence of the falsehood of the Catholic Church, which employed the devil's ability to easily fool the unwary. After all, witches hovered and flew too. As Thomas Browne argued in 1646, since Satan was a "natural Magician" he could "perform many acts in ways above our knowledge, though not transcending our natural powers." Meanwhile, however, Protestants and Catholics alike continued to believe that witches hovered and flew and should all be exterminated.

At exactly the same time that Catholics were canonizing levitating saints and burning flying witches and Protestants were busy tossing flying witches into the flames, too—by the thousands—modern empirical science was emerging and creating paradigm shifts of its own. The peak period for flying humans in Western history coincides with the initial development of a new materialistic way of thinking about reality that would reject all this flying as absolutely impossible nonsense. One could say that the oddest fact about two of the most extreme exemplars of miraculous baroque Catholicism, Joseph of Cupertino (1603–1663), "the Flying Friar," and María de Jesús de Ágreda (1602–1665), the bilocating and levitating nun, is that they walked the earth—and ostensibly hovered over it—at the same time as Isaac Newton (1642–1727).

Beyond the factual historical dimension of baroque-era levitators, divine or demonic, one runs into more abstract issues in the metaphysical and epistemological dimension of these accounts. And the questions there make historians very uncomfortable. Did these people really float in the air? If so, how and why, and how could it be proved? As soon as these questions begin to pop up, we historians proudly bring out our brackets and wield them with all the epistemological brawn we can muster. "We bracket the question of whether this happened or not," we say, and by that we mean that since we cannot prove that any of this hovering and flying happened, we put those questions aside. We limit ourselves to analyzing narratives and the beliefs expressed in those narratives but not the events reported in them. Those events remain suspended in an ether of their own, much like some stiff-jointed levitating saint, in that vast limbo where all unprovable and unusable testimonies get squirreled away. And all we are left with is the fact of the testimonies given and of the beliefs reflected in them.

The issue of whether so-and-so *really* flew cannot be addressed. And the same goes for bilocation or any other charisma associated with mystical ecstasy, for there is no way anyone today can prove that someone really hovered or flew or bilocated in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. No one's testimony from the distant past can be taken as absolute proof, not for something as uncommon and unnatural a phenomenon as levitation, even if corroborated by hundreds or thousands of similar testimonies, for a simple reason: like all miracles, by definition, phenomena such as levitation and bilocation are totally unlike others in history. If in fact they have taken place, the number of witnesses has been far too small, relatively speaking. And the further back one goes in time, the more difficult it becomes to defend the credibility of those witnesses. The argument made by David Hume in 1748 about the impossibility of proving any miracle solely from testimony is worth quoting at this point:

> A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined.... Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happens in the common course of nature.... There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation.... The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), "That no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavors to establish."

Nonetheless, while it is ultimately impossible for anyone to prove that any levitation or bilocation actually took place, the fact that there are eyewitness testimonies of such instances is easy enough to prove. And those testimonies, which are often rich in detail, tell us something about the past that our present-day culture predisposes many people to overlook or deride. This brings us back to Febvre's observation: "To comprehend is to complicate, to augment in depth. It is to widen on all sides. It is to vivify." The testimonies of witnesses to impossible events, which are themselves full of complexities and ambivalences, vivify the past. They allow us a glimpse of the world as some of those who lived long ago actually saw it.

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Centrist Illusions

Alexander Stern

How not to defend liberalism

Liberal democracy, we are told, is under attack. On op-ed pages and cable news panels, at university conferences and economic summits, and in politicians' interviews and speeches, defenses of liberal democracy have proliferated in the face of threats from populist and authoritarian leaders around the world. Most of these defenses, whether they come from the center-right or the center-left, share a great deal in both their diagnosis of the crisis and their prescriptions for how to recover a liberal democratic polity that seems to be slipping away.

It is hard to deny their main premise. A movement has indeed arisen on the Right that disregards democratic norms and liberal assumptions with alarming nonchalance. It's shown a willingness to undermine the integrity of our elections, barred discussion of certain ideas in classrooms, and even fomented a half-witted assault on the Congress itself. Meanwhile, on the other side of the political spectrum, an intolerance for dissent from progressive orthodoxy, as well as skepticism of the cultural value of free speech, have led to coercive conformity and "cancellation."

Protesters in New York City decry the influence of the richest 1 percent on politics, March 2012.

AP PHOTO/JOHN MINCHILLO

However, the defenses of liberalism tend to dwell on, sometimes for good reason, the risks posed to liberal democracy by ordinary people and popular movements—i.e. "wokeness" and populism—while neglecting those posed by the people closer to the levers of power. These defenses also tend, implicitly or explicitly, to equate liberalism with technocracy, or rule by expertise. In the end, they suggest that we must settle for an undemocratic, technocratic form of liberalism that leaves power in the hands of the few in order to forestall the most illiberal outcomes. This line of argument threatens to exacerbate the crisis of liberalism, widen the fissures in our society, and provoke the very outcomes it seeks to prevent.

Although centrists tend to portray liberalism as besieged by both the woke Left and the populist Right, they usually acknowledge the obvious fact that the threats from the Right are much more serious and immediate, targeting political institutions and processes. The repudiation of liberal values on the Left remains for the most part limited to cultural institutions, journalism, education, and human-resources departments.

The explosion of identity politics on the woke Left is, according to George Packer's *Last Best Hope*, a "rebellion from below," driven by the youth. "Young people coming of age in the disillusioned 2000s," Packer writes, picked up ideas from "critical theory," which "upends the universal values of the Enlightenment." In *Liberalism and Its Discontents*, Francis Fukuyama writes that the woke regard racism not as a personal or policy problem but as "a condition that is said to pervade all American institutions and consciousness." Systemic injustice thus provides a rationale for the suspension of liberal values in reeducation programs that take cultural sensitivity to an illiberal extreme, in policy proposals that would try to distribute goods like vaccines on the basis of race, and in a culture of sanctimony, censorship, and cancellation.

Whereas the woke Left regards the establishment as a continuation of rule by straight white men, the populist Right con-

ceives of it as a left-liberal, globalist elite that has seized power and decimated traditional white working- and middle-class communities. According to the right-wing narrative, this elite imposes its woke cultural values on everyone, unfairly distributes handouts to undeserving minority groups, and opens borders to new immigrants. In *The People vs. Democracy*, Yascha Mounk pins the worldwide rise of populism on "rising immigration, coupled with a deep, sustained stagnation of living standards," along with a loss of establishment control of the means of communication. This combination provides the rationale for a suspension of liberal values that will hand the country back to its rightful heirs, who can forcibly reestablish nationalist, Christian values and bring industry back to the American interior. This kind of right-wing populism leads eventually to its own bizarre postmodern consequences: nationalist and "trad" LARPing, wild conspiracy theories, and the carnivalesque assault on the Capitol.

Centrist defenders of liberalism, such as Packer, Fukuyama, and Mounk, tend to see a common root in these two illiberal movements, despite their obvious differences. Packer writes:

> In some ways Just America [Packer's term for the woke Left] resembles Real America [his term for the populist Right] and has entered the same dubious conflict from the other side. The disillusionment with liberal capitalism that gave rise to identity politics has also produced a new authoritarianism among many young white men. Just and Real America share a skepticism, from opposing points of view, about the universal ideas of the founding documents and the promise of America as a multi-everything democracy.

In short, Packer sees both these movements against liberalism as misguided reactions to social and economic dislocation: a "new tribalism" that comes from the bottom up. Coupled with this tribalism is an assault on reason itself that started with "critical theory" and postmodernism, which, according to Fukuyama, undermined the objective, scientific standpoint intimately tied to liberalism. "Of late," Fukuyama writes, "many of the arguments pioneered by the progressive left have drifted over to the populist right. When combined with modern communications technology, this critique lands us in a cognitive wasteland."

There is good reason to doubt aspects of this centrist narrative. To begin with, it doesn't go back far enough. The history of American politics from the 1960s shows that it is not "disillusionment" but satisfaction with liberal capitalism that has underwritten the rise of the cultural politics that undergird both the woke Left and populist Right. Both standpoints arise from the culture war that has increasingly gripped American politics since the 1980s and taken over from the more materialist political conflict that dominated the immediate postwar period. Indeed, the turn toward cultural politics depended on a period of relatively widespread prosperity in the West. As Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris have argued, this broad prosperity allowed baby boomers to focus their political energies on issues that were less obviously material, such as civil rights, gender equality, and gay marriage. But according to Inglehart and Norris, this kind of cultural politics eventually helped undermine the prosperity on which it was based. As traditional left-right disputes over economic issues were left behind, a technocratic, neoliberal consensus on economic policy set in. This consensus allowed the proceeds of growth to go to an increasingly small and wealthy minority while marginalizing the left-wing economic dissent that had made the relative equality of the postwar boom possible.

Instead of class conflict, politics became a battle between two cultural factions, neither of which represented the working class. On the left side of these politics are many professionals whose concerns for equality have narrowed to involuted and essentialized conceptions of race and gender detached from the real material needs of the marginalized groups they claim to support. Meanwhile, the reactionary Right is populated by many relatively high-earning but uneducated small-business owners and tradespeople who obsess over the excesses of the Left, indulge in fear-mongering about crime and immigration, and toy with—or outright embrace—racist tropes. While this right-wing identity politics likes to invoke the downtrodden white working class and sometimes borrows from the rhetoric of mid-century labor politics, it effectively serves the interests of another set of the elite through a standard business-oriented Republican playbook. Our fervid cultural politics do not emerge, bottom-up, from a public that channels its economic anxiety in misguided, illiberal directions; it originates with those at the top of the economic system, whose privileges it obscures.

These cultural politics may appear to "politicize" absolutely everything—from sports and music to gas stoves and canned beans—but in actuality the public sphere has been effectively depoliticized, to use Jürgen Habermas's term. In his 1962 book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas already recognized that the liberal space in which ideas about how to organize society were once debated—however exclusionary that space may have been—had given way to a largely simulated public sphere captured by advertising and other forms of manipulation. He writes:

> When the laws of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and of social labor also pervaded the sphere reserved for private people as a public, rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unraveled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode.

The commercialization of media, in other words, effectively turns the public sphere into the plaything of the interests that control it. Entertainment and information are mixed together to the point that "instead of doing justice to reality," the media tends "to present a substitute more palatable for consumption." Radio and television tend to replace critical public debate with manipulable preferences and tastes. Finally, the public and private spheres become inextricably tangled together. On the one hand, public matters "are garbed in private dress and through personalization distorted to the point of unrecognizability."

Democratization made the country more liberal, and liberalization made it more democratic.

And, on the other, private life is "pried open" to the point that not just individual lives but "the problems of life" themselves become media fodder and "political" matters.

The embrace of neoliberalism in the decades since Habermas's book was published has only further advanced commercial control over the public sphere, including on the internet. Depoliticized culture-war content monopolizes attention, drives subscriptions, and pleases advertisers, while catalyzing anger and further confusing private and public—culture and politics—through partisan sensationalism. The political conflict that plays out in the media is not the negotiation of conflicting material interests and ideas about the common good, but a dramatized escalation of personal grievance and cultural antagonism.

It is this manipulation, far more than the adoption of little-read postmodern texts, that has placed us in a "post-truth" moment. And it is this manipulation, far more than any spontaneous discontent emerging from the youth or the hoi polloi, that has produced our illiberal, "depoliticized" politics. The tribalism that so concerns centrist liberals is not just a misguided expression of discontent, but the predictable and increasingly uncontrollable escalation of the pseudo-politics that our elites have favored for decades. As Nancy Isenberg memorably put it in her book *White Trash*, "When you turn an election into a three-ring circus, there's always a chance that the dancing bear will win."

In the face of ubiquitous culture war, we should actually be heartened by the relatively material—and, in their way, liberal—concerns of the general public. Take the line of critique that united the surprisingly popular Trump and Sanders campaigns in 2016. Both candidates emphasized a rigged economic and political system where decisions were made by an entrenched elite. Both candidates claimed, albeit with wildly different degrees of sophistication and credibility, that the costs of elite failure were borne by the middle and working classes, and that the priorities of global corporations had been allowed to take precedence over the interests and desires of the American people. But cultural politics either completely overwhelmed these critiques from the start (in the case of Trump) or were deployed against them (in the case of Sanders).

To their credit, many centrist liberal authors acknowledge the fact that inequality is a principal cause of our political crisis. However, their construal of the problem suggests solutions that would neither distribute economic power more evenly nor promote democracy. This starts with how they conceive of the relationship between democracy and liberalism.

Both Mounk and Fukuyama treat liberalism and democracy as completely separable categories: they may be historically intertwined but they are, according to this view, logically unrelated. As Mounk and Fukuyama rightly point out, there can be illiberal democracies—like those of the ancient world—and undemocratic liberalism—Hong Kong under British rule, for example. For Mounk, this is evidence against the claim that liberal rights and democratic sovereignty are naturally complementary; they were not always associated in the past and need not be in the future.

Mounk admits that the technocratic rule of developed nations today amounts to its own form of "undemocratic liberalism," but he seems to find this trend inevitable—and preferable to the alternatives. Fukuyama, meanwhile, contends that "the present-day crisis of liberal democracy revolves in the first instances less around democracy strictly understood than around liberal institutions." The implication is that we can combat the crisis in liberalism without combatting the crisis in democracy. The important thing is preserving individual rights; genuine democracy is a luxury at best and a threat to liberalism at worst.

But as Marc Plattner puts it in an article for *Foreign Affairs*, "overstating the disjunction between liberalism and democracy can easily lead to new misunderstanding." The illiberality of ancient democracies—which heavily restricted voting rights—also made them, by today's standards at least, undemocratic. Similarly, illiberal restrictions on freedom of speech in nations like Russia and Turkey put the democratic nature of their elections in serious doubt. Meanwhile, undemocratic liberalism tends—because of its restrictions on voting rights—to restrict other freedoms as well. Without access to the ballot in the United States, for example, women and Black people were also denied other basic rights. Democratization made the country more liberal, and liberalization made it more democratic.

The intertwining of liberalism and democracy is not just historical contingency, but the result of the fact that, as Plattner writes, "the political doctrine at the source of liberalism also contains a deeply egalitarian and majoritarian dimension." Classical forms of liberalism have emphasized that, in addition to a balance of powers within government, liberal democracies require a "wide dispersion of power in both the private economy and civil society," as Paul Starr explains in his book *Freedom's Power*.

Early- and mid-twentieth-century American liberalism made advances by recognizing that, under industrial capitalism, supporting individual liberty and economic freedom required democratizing workplaces through support for unions, preventing undue concentrations of market power

through antitrust lawsuits, regulating financial institutions to prevent unfair and destabilizing speculation, and maintaining a robust welfare state to provide aid to those left behind by the market. This liberalism recognized that liberty needed to be protected not just from governments or the masses, but also from an economic order that, for example, colludes to raise prices on consumers, extracts burdensome rents from small producers by monopolizing distribution, and undermines worker power by intimidation and, sometimes, coercion. As Edmund E. Jacobitti puts it, "[T]oday wealth is as powerful a threat to liberty as the masses ever were."

Separating liberalism from democracy allows centrist liberals to sideline the egalitarian implications of liberalism and associate it with anti-democratic technocracy. While expressing some regret that deference to expert decision-making may be undemocratic, Mounk doesn't even seem to consider the possibility that it might also be illiberal. Given the "considerable technical expertise" required to understand an "increasingly complex" world, he writes, "it seems we must choose between achieving international cooperation on key issues by a troublingly undemocratic path—and not achieving it at all."

Fukuyama, for his part, presents a narrow account of the origins of liberalism that focuses exclusively on its protection of individual and cultural freedom. Liberalism arose, Fukuyama writes, in the religious wars following the Protestant Reformation, where various "Christian sects" sought "to impose their religious dogma on their populations."

> Classical liberalism can therefore be understood as an institutional solution to the problem of governing over diversity, or, to put it in slightly different terms, of peacefully *managing diversity* in pluralistic societies [my italics]. The most fundamental principle enshrined in liberalism is one of tolerance: you do not have to agree with your fellow citizens about the most important things, but only that each individual should get to decide what they are without interference from you or from the state.

Liberalism, in other words, is little more than an antidote to culture war. Its guarantees of individual rights, a private sphere of autonomy, and limited state power are emphasized at the cost of its prescriptions for how private and political power should be distributed and exercised in society. Liberal governance, meanwhile, is conceived of as a form of apolitical management that balances diverse interests according to its own calculations rather than allowing them a measure of genuine political power.

A conception of governance as a technical matter for experts, as Habermas writes in his 1970 book *Toward a Rational Society*, obfuscates its fundamentally value-laden nature and takes deliberation about the best way to organize society out of the hands of the citizenry. Technocracy is the natural partner of mass media's reduction of information to entertainment, which places the real work of governance behind an emotionally charged screen. For Habermas, this system amounts to a form of domination, since the arena for rational deliberation by an informed populace is both degraded in itself and detached from the actual levers of power.

A narrow focus on individual liberty allows centrist authors to ignore these substantive threats to liberalism. The only important danger, they believe, is that one side of the culture war or the other will take control of the government and impose its beliefs on the public at large. Other dangers get short shrift. Even when these authors are critical of policies that have led to the upward redistribution of wealth and power, they tend to construe them as examples not of elite capture of the economic system, but rather of "too much" philosophical liberalism in economic policy—an error of management that requires a managerial fix, rather than the predictable result of too much concentration of political and economic power in the hands of too few people.

Fukuyama cites Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek as among the liberal thinkers who "sharply denigrated the role of the state in the economy and emphasized free markets as spurs to growth and efficient allocators of resources." Beginning in the 1970s, neoliberal policymakers and economists freed corporations from what they regarded as counterproductive and inefficient regulation and held individuals more responsible for their well-being by cutting welfare spending.

But it is misleading to characterize neoliberalism as simply "anti-regulation" and "pro-market." As Quinn Slobodian shows in his book *Globalists*, proponents of neoliberalism conceived of it from the first as a movement to develop and shape a new super-national regulatory structure for a global economy. It was not primarily an anti-government movement in favor of an unfettered market, but rather an effort to insulate the global economy from what neoliberals regarded as the irrational behavior of democratic nation-states. Hayek himself rejected the idea of a "minimal state" and made explicit that he was after a "dethronement of politics," not of government as such. The goal, Slobodian writes, was a new form of empire with "an invisible government of the economy first, and a visible government of neutered nations second." The government of the economy was designed not to protect individual rights, nor to constrain government per se, but to create institutions that would "override national legislation that might disrupt the global rights of capital."

The global economic order created by neoliberals has not merely dethroned democratic politics; it has established a new kind of political power. As governments turned from containing to facilitating the excesses of big business, the lines between national governments and private banks and corporations have blurred. Our technocracy involves the alignment of private and public bureaucracies, facilitated by revolving doors between them. Consider the U.S. bank bailouts of 2008. The bailouts and favorable terms given to reckless banks—however necessary they may have been to rescue the larger economy—involved a state of exception where sovereignty itself was difficult to locate, as Adam Tooze points out in his book on financial crises, *Crashed*. "If this was an

act of sovereignty, whose sovereignty was it? The American state's, or that of the 'new Wall Street'—the network personified by figures like [Henry] Paulson and [Timothy] Geithner who tied the Treasury and the Fed to America's globalized financial sector?"

For centrist authors, part of liberalism's role of "peacefully managing diversity" involves correcting the mistaken policies that have led to the populist surge. Here, they reflexively take on the perspective of the managers without seeming to realize that technocratic management is a significant part of the problem. Their proposed reforms leave untouched the existing private-public power structure, the tendency toward policymaking by compromised, if not outright corrupted, actors, and the insulation of economic power from democratic accountability.

Mounk, for example, proposes reforms like more progressive taxation, better job training, and expansions of the welfare state. Tellingly, he does not mention reforms to make collective bargaining easier or to enforce antitrust laws more vigorously. Nor does he have anything to say about the way neoliberals themselves dismantled liberal regulatory structures and liberal democratic institutions like trade unions. He rightly condemns the folly of extremists who would simply tear down existing liberal institutions. But not everyone who supports radical changes in pursuit of fairer economic conditions is bent on nihilistic destruction.

In lieu of such changes, centrist liberals tend to recommend cultural solutions like individual self-restraint and moderation (Fukuyama), or being "willing to criticize your own" and resist vilification of the other side (Mounk). Packer places more emphasis on the ills of corruption and concentrated economic power than Mounk and Fukuyama do. Still, because he focuses on cultural threats to liberal democracy, he also relies heavily on personal prescriptions: he asks Americans to ditch social media and spend more time with those "who don't look or talk or think like them." "Creating the conditions of equality requires new structures and policies," he writes. "Acquiring the art of self-government needs something else—new ways of thinking and living." Such platitudes gloss over the fact that our polarization and democratic incompetence are the consequence of material disempowerment. Fixing the former requires fixing the latter. Policy tweaks and cultural exhortations will not do.

Real solutions to our political crisis would reverse the concentration of power caused by neoliberal policies. Reducing inequality by technocratic means—an unlikely prospect in any case—wouldn't be enough. Thanks in large part to pressure from the Left, the Biden administration has taken some initial steps: Biden appointees to the National Labor Relations Board have begun to enforce labor law against companies used to interfering with their employees' right to collective bargaining; the administration's Department of Justice has more aggressively tackled corporate concentration; and its Federal Trade Commission has proposed rules to stop unfair hiring practices and anti-competitive mergers and acquisitions.

But, as the administration's foiling of a rail strike and its bailout of Silicon Valley Bank show, there is still a long way to go. Alternative forms of worker representation should be pursued, such as sectoral bargaining—where a federation of all the firms in a given economic sector is forced by the government to negotiate wages with representatives of that sector's entire labor force. A comprehensive anti-corruption program, such as the one Elizabeth Warren has outlined, is needed to combat the influence of the financial industry. Absent such a program, it is difficult to see how the hyper-financialization of so much of our economy can be checked.

Finally, experiments with other, more local forms of economic and political power must be encouraged. Some contemporary authors, like Branko Milanović, have proposed programs remarkably akin to the distributism championed in the early twentieth century by Catholics writers such as G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. These would distribute capital ownership downward through cooperatives and other common ownership structures. Others, like Michael Lind, have called for a form of "democratic pluralism" that would delegate rulemaking power in particular areas to small institutions like wage boards, with mandated representation of various stakeholder groups. Without access to new forms of power like these, the resentment and cynicism that brought us Trump will continue to grow, as will interest in a "post-liberal" future.

Centrist liberal authors are rightly troubled by exponents of post-liberalism like Patrick Deneen and Adrian Vermeule, who have argued that liberalism's hands-off attitude toward morality deprives liberal democracies of the virtues needed to sustain a healthy political community. For Deneen, liberalism is behind a drift toward atomism that will ultimately doom the whole project to collapse, since the virtues on which liberalism depends—self-restraint, civic-mindedness, democratic competence—are systematically degraded by the logic of liberalism itself. Liberalism, on Deneen's view, can't help but produce technocracy and a nationalized, sensationalized politics. To the extent that the people do have a say, Deneen writes in *Why Liberalism Failed*, it is not surprising that an isolated, powerless electorate will opt for a strongman who claims to be capable of "reining in the power of a distant and ungovernable state and market."

Despite their distaste for Deneen, the arguments of centrists like Mounk and Fukuyama unwittingly lend force to his critique. They propose to contain the populist threat by means of the same technocratic mechanisms that generated it. Deneen writes, "Today's liberal critics of democracy…condemn the deformed and truncated demotic actions of a degraded citizenry that liberalism itself has created." He is right that "their cure is the source of the ills they would redress," but wrong to call this "liberalism." Technocratic neoliberalism is not the rightful heir of the liberal tradition, but an anti-democratic distortion of it.

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The Drowned and the Saved

ANNA SURINYACH

Separating Europe from Africa, the Mediterranean Sea has long been an important migration route for refugees. But it is only since 2014 that the number of people who die trying to cross the Mediterranean each month has been reported. Since 2014, more than 27,845 missing persons have been counted, although only God and the sea really know how many people did not make it. We have all seen images of capsizing boats overloaded with migrants, of people jumping into the sea to escape. Behind the sobering figures and heartbreaking images, there are people like Fatima, Abu Bakar, Sara, Hussein, Mamadou, Abdou—people I have met since I began photographing rescue missions in the Mediterranean in 2015. Each of them has his or her own story to tell. Each has left behind family and friends. Most are motivated by desperation. Since 2015, I have seen the faces of hundreds of terrified women; I have heard the crying of thousands of children hidden below deck; I have spoken with many men who were tortured in Libyan prisons. All of them want what all of us want: safety, a place where they can imagine a future for themselves and their loved ones. My hope is that the following images will move you in a way statistics and headlines can't, that the faces of these migrants will remind you that this ongoing humanitarian crisis involves ordinary human beings exposed to the elements and at the mercy of overpowering forces beyond their control: droughts, floods, wars, human trafficking, and the barbarous policies of politicians claiming to protect European civilization.

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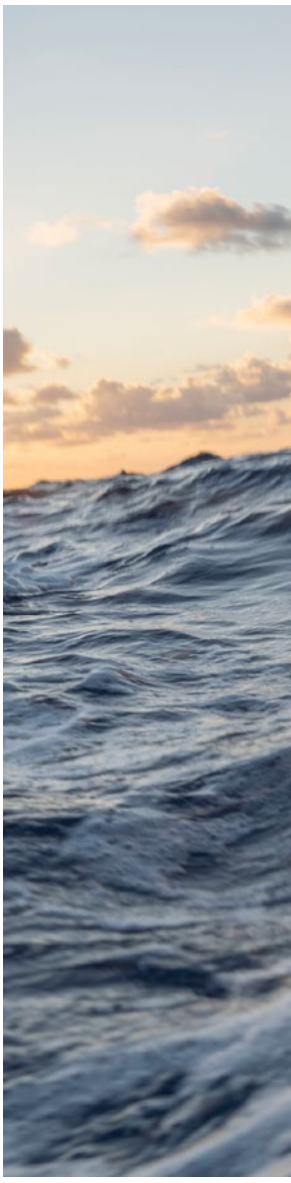
RIGHT: Some of the passengers on the boat rescued by Open Arms.

TOP:
Two boys from Eritrea sleep after being rescued by Médecins Sans Frontières. They left Libya and arrived safely in Sicily in July 2015.

BOTTOM:
A group of people mainly from Somalia and Eritrea arrive in Sicily after being rescued by Médecins Sans Frontières, July 9, 2015.

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: A mother and her baby are rescued by the Médecins Sans Frontières teams on the Mediterranean Sea, July 2015.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM: A man from Guinea Conakry prays on the deck of the *Dignity I*, one of the Médecins Sans Frontières rescue ships.



OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: A woman prays while aboard the speedboat of the Spanish NGO ProActiva Open Arms in August 2017. Twelve people were found dead on the boat on which she had been traveling.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM: Migrants aboard the *Dignity I* embrace one another after the Italian coast is sighted. After disembarkation, refugees and migrants are taken to detention centers by the Italian authorities.

ABOVE: A group of people traveling in a wooden boat celebrate the arrival of the Open Arms team. They fled from Sfax, Tunisia, in August 2022, but the majority of them are from Bangladesh.


30-50
DIGNITY

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: A group of people, most of them from Syria, trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM: A group of people wait to be rescued after spending more than twenty hours at sea in July 2015. The crowded inflatable boats usually carry a hundred people, but wooden boats can accommodate more than five hundred.

TOP:
Migrants aboard the *Golfo Azzurro* celebrate after the Italian authorities assigned their boat to a port on August 2, 2017. One of the Open Arms volunteers has turned on the radio, and a Bob Marley song is playing.

BOTTOM:
An Open Arms team assists migrants waiting to be rescued by Italian authorities.

RAND RICHARDS COOPER

History Channel Mode

Christopher Nolan's 'Oppenheimer'

Is anyone else surprised by the popularity of *Oppenheimer*? The film has triggered a mammoth cultural explosion, igniting topics that range from the dangers of politicizing science, to the hermeneutics of the mushroom cloud, to the intricacies of IMAX, to AI military technology and "our Oppenheimer moment," to the "subversive" nature of going to a movie theater in the age of streaming. Not to mention the whole "Barbenheimer" phenomenon.

Based on Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin's 2005 biography, *American Prometheus*, *Oppenheimer* charts the brilliant career of its eponymous hero; but the career of director Christopher Nolan has a shimmer all its own. Nolan's CV is every young filmmaker's envy: artsy short film (*Doodlebug*), followed by bargain-basement debut that garners critical attention (*Following*); then a breakthrough art-house film that makes money (*Memento*); and finally off to Batman-land, rocketing Nolan from no-budget to mega-budget in just eight years. The rare director seemingly able to have it all, Nolan specializes in box-office blockbusters "pitched at the divide between art and industry, poetry and entertainment," as Manohla Dargis wrote about *The Dark Knight*.

Nolan's core obsessions were laid out in *Memento* (2000), a flashy neo-noir thriller that gave the term "retro" a whole new meaning. That film consists of short sequences that move forward but are arranged in reverse, tracking backwards in time from a revenge killing in the opening scene to the original crime that incited it. *Memento*'s devices of narrative uncertainty require some cognitive calisthenics on the part of viewers. In the two decades since, Nolan has returned to this sweet spot with films such as *Inception* (2010) and *Tenet* (2020), movies that reflected his abiding urge to drill down into, and manipulate, the fundamental structures of cinematic reality. No wonder a story about theoretical physics would attract him.

A three-hour biopic, *Oppenheimer* sets up as a bildungsroman, charting physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer's education and character formation. We follow his youthful tour of European universities in the 1920s, where he meets science luminaries from Heisenberg to Niels Bohr; his eventual landing at Berkeley, where his ideas catch fire (an artful time-lapse sequence shows rising attendance as his classes become popular); and, finally, the unfolding of the Manhattan Project under his direction at Los Alamos, New Mexico. Well, not *finally*, in fact. A substantial chunk of the movie consists of layered-in testimony from two postwar political proceedings: a 1954 Atomic Energy Commission hearing to determine whether Oppenheimer would maintain his security clearance; and the 1959 Senate confirmation hearing of Lewis Strauss as Eisenhower's Secretary of Commerce. Strauss was the man who hired Oppenheimer to head the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton, then subsequently subverted his career, apparently for reasons of personal jealousy and resentment.

It is a lot of ground for a movie to cover, and let me lay my cards on the table: amid near-unanimous critical acclaim for *Oppenheimer*, I second the dissenting vote of the ever-acerbic *New Yorker* critic, Richard Brody, who likened it to "a movie-length Wikipedia article." In contrast with the elusive and profound aura that enwraps Nolan's storytelling in his best movies, here the director takes a kind of History Channel approach, in which private lives are stapled to a public timeline. Thus, for example, the publication of an important physics paper by Oppenheimer in a science journal on September 1, 1939, is upstaged by a screaming newspaper headline, "War in Europe!" There are history footnotes, as when we briefly meet a Los Alamos physicist named Klaus Fuchs—history buffs will register the future notorious spy. Ethical quandaries arising from the prospect of bombing the Japanese are limned for us in meetings where stakeholders hash it all out, seminar style. "Is there no way to demonstrate it first?" asks one of the physicists. "Oh, we intend to demonstrate it in the most convincing way possible—twice!" barks General Leslie Groves, Los Alamos's

Cillian Murphy's "strangely unearthly face, set in a far-off, suffering gaze" in Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*

Army overseer. It all feels conspicuously…educational.

As for the character of Oppenheimer, he is supposed to present the tragic paradox of a civilized humanist who lends his talents to the harnessing of a violence that could destroy civilization. By way of characterization, we are given visual gestures that juxtapose his various passions and preoccupations—a look around his office disclosing T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" along with prints of modernist art, followed by hallucinatory visions of cosmic particle-scapes set to thunderous music, followed by Oppenheimer quoting a John Donne sonnet to a baffled General Groves (an enjoyably gruff Matt Damon).

But what kind of man was Oppenheimer, really? A few stray moments in the film, clearly culled from the Bird-Sherwin biography, hint at a driven, impulsive, and eccentric bohemian with a dark side. In an early scene from his student days, he impulsively injects a disliked teacher's apple with cyanide, and has to rush back later to avert calamity. Cyanide? Such behavior is so out of whack with the film's portrayal of its protagonist that I found myself saying, "Really?"; and although General Groves calls Oppenheimer "theatrical, egotistical, and unstable," we don't see enough of these qualities in action. While Oppenheimer's ethical dilemmas are laid out with teacherly clarity, his psychological and emotional complexities never really come into focus; oddly for a biopic, Nolan has made his subject *less* interesting than he was in life.

The one-note intensity of Cillian Murphy's performance doesn't help. Cinematographer Hoyte van Hoytema fills the screen with closeups of Murphy's strangely unearthly face, set in a far-off, suffering gaze. This haunted and passive bearing is at odds with the reality of Oppenheimer's power, and it is disconcerting to see Murphy's wraithlike figure striding down Los Alamos's dusty main street in his fedora like a sheriff in a gunslinging town. "He was founder, mayor and sheriff, all rolled into one," one visitor recalls. "You are an American Prometheus," Niels Bohr tells him. But we get almost no sense of any megalomaniacal dimension to his character.

Yet power and its mesmerizing allure lie at the heart of the story. The film scrutinizes the scientists' justifications for developing a weapon of supreme destructiveness—first and foremost, the fear that the Nazis would get there first. As it turned out, they weren't particularly close; Hitler mistrusted the science and pursued conventional weapons such as the V-2 rocket, and then the war in Europe was over. But the Manhattan Project had developed an unstoppable momentum, and in Oppenheimer apparently most of all. In Jon Else's illuminating 1980 documentary, *The Day After Trinity*, British physicist Freeman Dyson recalls that "the dream somehow got hold of him—to produce a nuclear weapon." And Hans Bethe, another key player at Los Alamos, adds that Oppenheimer

"completely changed to fit the new role." This change—what it drew on in Oppenheimer, and how it ramified—goes largely missing from *Oppenheimer*, and its absence vitiates the drama, reducing tragedy to mere chronicle.

The film is three hours long, yet the portrait of its protagonist seems sketchy, and one wonders how Nolan might have allocated time differently. Take, for instance, the decision to showcase the hearings from the 1950s. Presumably, the intention was to dramatize the emerging political dynamic of the Cold War, with its rituals of character assassination. But the resulting "action" is bureaucratic and dense. Nolan's script takes us deep in the weeds of political infighting surrounding Oppenheimer, his nemesis Strauss (played with cool cynicism by Robert Downey Jr.), and the controversy over the physicist's security clearance, including extensive testimony about a long-ago conversation with an academic mentor who proposed sharing info on the Manhattan Project with the Soviets, and whether this constituted treason. The director's attempt to wring drama from all the political maneuvering reaches a bizarre climax when he sets testimony from the hearings to the same tumultuous, thunderous music that he used to dramatize the advent of the bomb itself.

Don't get me wrong: there are some terrific moments when *Oppenheimer* succeeds in conveying a sense of awed horror, and of a moral recklessness bordering on the obscene, such as one scene in which the physicists place bets on the likely kilotonnage of the blast (Oppenheimer bets on three kilotons), with Enrico Fermi taking side bets on the likelihood of "atmospheric ignition," which would incinerate all of New Mexico. And the film's best moment occurs after the bombs are dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ending the war, when Oppenheimer speaks to a jubilant crowd in Los Alamos. To the audience's thunderously stamping feet and shouts of "Oppy! Oppy!" the physicist starts a conventional victory speech—"the world will remember this day"—but suddenly breaks off. Silent, sweating, he seems to dissociate, as everything around him slides into the surreal: a scream; noiseless applause; a blinding light and a vision of calamity, with people sick and dying and covered in ash. The disorienting power of the scene conveys both the calamity of nuclear war and Oppenheimer's inner turmoil, his nauseating sense of complicity.

Oppenheimer needs more of this scene's surreal energy; strangely, for a Christopher Nolan film, it needs more strangeness. But right after that hallucinatory episode, Nolan cuts to a cover of Oppenheimer on *Time* magazine, and from then on reverts to History Channel mode, dutifully covering the political hearings, as well as a brusque interview with President Truman in which the physicist agonizes about having "blood on my hands" and is scoffingly dismissed.

After watching *Oppenheimer*, I streamed *The Day After Trinity*. ("Trinity" refers to Oppenheimer's name for the bomb test site, inspired by a Donne poem, and the "day after" refers to yet another hearing, in 1965, at which Oppenheimer was asked about talks on halting the spread of nukes, and responded, "It's twenty years too late. It should have been done the day after Trinity.") It may seem paradoxical to suggest that a documentary more acutely conveys the tragedy of Los Alamos than a feature film does. Yet for me at least, it did. In the decades since the Manhattan Project, many commentators seeking to capture the dreadful awe that accompanied the advent of the atomic bomb have invoked Oppenheimer's quotation from the Bhagavad Gita—"Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds"—and Nolan leans heavily on it, using it not once but twice. The documentary pursues the horror more subtly, in a banality-of-evil way. It contains a small but terrible moment, when the Manhattan Project physicist Robert Serber displays a section of a wall removed from a classroom in Nagasaki, bearing the outline of a window sash imprinted on it photographically by the blast. "You see the angle here?" Serber says, holding it up. "That shows you that the bomb went off at exactly the height it was supposed to." And Serber can't quite suppress a smile—quickly followed by a look of sickly confusion. All these years later, he still feels *pride*.

That look does more to evoke the scientists' moral disarray than does the pose of abject contrition in which the last third of Nolan's film freezes Robert Oppenheimer. Serber's smile reveals candor about the thrills of scientific discovery, even as his sickened look betrays an awareness of what resulted when those thrills were channeled into the priorities of what Eisenhower himself would call the military-industrial complex. What does it mean—for science and its practitioners, for civilization itself—when mass death becomes, well, a project?

The enormity of such questions mocked even the formidable intelligence assembled on the team at Los Alamos. Recalling the shocking power of the July 1945 test blast for Else's documentary, Frank Oppenheimer, who worked on the Manhattan Project along with his older brother, becomes suddenly anxious, repeatedly rubbing his eyes and forehead as he describes being stunned by the heat of the blast, twenty miles away. "It was terrifying," he recalls.

In the presence of that terror, Else asks, what was the first thing the assembled physicists said to one another? Frank Oppenheimer pauses. "'It worked,'" he says. And upon learning just three weeks later that the bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima? Again Oppenheimer offers that stricken look, and again, candor. "Our first thought," he recalls, "was, 'Thank God it wasn't a dud.'"

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'This Is Our Opera'

An interview with Jake Heggie

Jake Heggie is the composer of ten operas, including works based on Moby-Dick *and* It's a Wonderful Life. *His first opera,* Dead Man Walking, *with a libretto by Terrence McNally and new staging by Ivo van Hove, will open the 2023–24 season of the Metropolitan Opera in New York later this month. It adapts a memoir by Sr. Helen Prejean, whose work as a spiritual advisor to inmates on death row and advocacy against capital punishment helped bring about a major revision to the Catechism of the Catholic Church under Pope Francis. Heggie spoke recently with Associate Editor Griffin Oleynick by Zoom. Their conversation has been edited for clarity and length.*

GRIFFIN OLEYNICK: *Dead Man Walking* premiered more than two decades ago, at the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco. It was your first opera—you've since composed nine more—and one that altered the course of your career. Take us back to that moment: How did the opera originate?

JAKE HEGGIE: I was actually working full time in the San Francisco Opera's marketing and public-relations department when all of this unfolded in the early 1990s. I trained as a composer and pianist. But in the late eighties I developed focal dystonia—my right hand began curling into a fist. So I couldn't play the piano, and I stopped composing.

But my day job immersed me in the magic of opera. I heard the greatest singers in the world, and got to know them, too. That spark of creativity that had always been there suddenly started burning in me again.

I began writing songs for famous singers: Frederica von Stade, Renée Fleming, and Dawn Upshaw. They loved them, and performed them all over the world. I felt free and inspired. So I began composing like nobody's business. I also got

Joyce DiDonato as Sr. Helen Prejean and Ryan McKinny as Joseph De Rocher in Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*

PAOLA KUDACKI/MET OPERA

Sr. Helen gave us her blessing to use artistic license, to invent characters and change things for the stage. But she did have one request: that Dead Man Walking *remain a story of redemption.*

through the focal dystonia, thanks to the Dorothy Taubma technique, and began to play the piano again.

Before long, the general director of the San Francisco Opera asked me if I'd ever thought about writing an opera. I hadn't, but when he offered me the opportunity to do so, I immediately said "yes." I then met with Terrence McNally, a Tony-award-winning playwright, who suggested we adapt *Dead Man Walking* for the stage. I shivered, every hair stood on end—I could hear the music, the possibilities, solos, duets, choruses, etc. I was just thirty-six when Terrence and I got started. I never dreamed I'd have a career inside music. But here I was, in 1998, having gone from the PR department to composer-in-residence.

I connected with Sr. Helen Prejean early on. She was very much on board, and remained active in the creative process. She gave us her blessing to use artistic license, to invent characters and change things for the stage. But she did have one request: that *Dead Man Walking* remain a story of redemption.

GO: *Dead Man Walking* isn't really about the politics of capital punishment, but about the big themes and emotions that have long been associated with opera: fear and vengeance, love and redemption, tragedy and hope. And the score is incredibly varied, containing everything from the influence of classical Italian opera to rock, blues, jazz, and spirituals.

JH: That's right. I find it really boring when someone just tells me how I should feel about an issue or a subject, rather than letting me feel it and think about it for myself. So capital punishment is there in the background, raising the stakes to life or death at every moment. But Terrence's libretto doesn't give us an argument, it invites us into experience. There's Sr. Helen's naïveté and her crisis of faith, but also her connection with Joseph and the families of his victims. Her spiritual journey becomes ours, too.

I love the film version of *Dead Man Walking,* but opera can take you deeper. You're watching three-dimensional people go through it live, in front of you. And the performers sing without microphones, allowing you to feel the vibrations in your core.

That's how the songs came about, too—I *felt* them. Take Sr. Helen's signature hymn, "He Will Gather Us Around," which anchors the opera. I was in New York to meet with Terrence, and as I was getting into a cab to leave for the airport, it just hit me—words, music, everything. Sr. Helen's music changes, though, as she meets other characters. And their respective musical styles evolve and change as they encounter each other, as well.

That's what makes this opera work: it's specifically American and contemporary, but also timeless and universal. Unfortunately, in this country, capital punishment is still a debate, and we increased our execution rate during the Trump years. The best operas are always timely: Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* is about class systems, who gets what, and whose rights matter. That's also true of Verdi's *La Traviata* and Puccini's *La Boheme*. But they're also about more than that, and they continue to resonate. In *Dead Man Walking*, the moral dilemma is present from the start: Is Joseph a monster, or can he be redeemed?

GO: I want to ask you about the art form of opera itself. When most people think of opera, they're not thinking of new works, or an "accessible" show. It seems like fans are wary of innovation, and critics are always declaring the opera to be dead. And yet this year the Metropolitan Opera will feature its highest number of contemporary operas ever. What explains this? Does opera have a future?

JH: When I composed *Dead Man Walking*, it was maybe one of two or three world premieres that year. Now there are dozens every season. Debates about whether opera has changed tend not to be very interesting, because opera has *always* changed. Composers and librettists have worked with stories taken from controversial books and news headlines. And they've mined myths and legends—things people already knew, but might be able to feel or understand in a different way. Opera needn't feel threatened by films or streaming—the form has reinvented itself constantly for four hundred years. And there's every reason to suppose people will still gather in theaters to hear important stories sung by gifted singers centuries from now, certainly in a different way than now.

The opera house itself is a sacred space. It's a place for community, where we gather to experience these things *together*—and then there's room for dialogue. The ritual of opera allows this to occur naturally, and that's the brilliance of the way Terrence selected the story and wrote the libretto for *Dead Man Walking.* Most people already know something about it. They definitely have opinions about the morality of the death penalty. So it invites a kind of

dialogue and conversation before people even walk into the theater.

We can't predict the future, but I see a lot of vitality. Opera will look and sound different, reinventing itself the same way that America has. That's how it was in Italy in the nineteenth century—they laid claim to it, made it their own. So did the French, the Germans, and the Russians. And, I should add, the Americans. Look at Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, or the work of composers Carlisle Floyd, Philip Glass, and John Adams. They've all done so much work to expand the form. And now there's an explosion because opera companies have realized they can't just depend on the status quo—they have to engage with contemporary society, or they'll be left behind.

That's not to say we shouldn't perform old operas—we should! But the way we stage and perform them is changing, and it only makes those works richer and more relevant. Most of all, what the opera needs is young people. But they have to own it—from the writing to the directing to the singing, even the unusual spaces in which they perform. They have to feel like it's *theirs*, not their grandparents'. This is happening in cities all across the country—not just New York, but Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, Houston—and it's very smart.

The opera world is precarious if it only clings to what it has been. But there's so much happening *now*, and it's very exciting. If opera wants to attract a younger audience, it has to give young people something to get excited and care about. And that means exploring: not just appealing subjects, but actually making the performance an *event*. There's no lack of interest in big musical events. Just look at this past summer's Taylor Swift tour!

There's another important fact worth mentioning. Forty years ago, American schools began removing arts and music programs from elementary and middle schools. And that was a huge mistake, because the arts are essential to what makes us human. What are the humanities? They're the things that humanize and connect us, that help us identify a shared vision. Defunding humanities programs has had a huge social cost.

If we want opera to flourish, our first priority should be to get the arts and humanities back into public schools as quickly as possible. We should be focused on that, as on almost nothing else. Young people are starved for this kind of stuff. They love everything opera contains: not just the music, but the different kinds of singing and acting, the movement and costumes and set design. But we have a couple of generations that have been deprived of it—they haven't experienced it and don't know why it matters. But it does matter, and we need to do a better job of letting people know that the opera house is *their* community center, too.

GO: Speaking of new operas, this fall your most recent opera, *Intelligence*, is having its world premiere at Houston Grand Opera. Tell us about it.

JH: Yes, this is my fourth big project with them. They're known for surprising themes and different ways of presenting things. I don't like to just repeat myself as a composer, either—the scores of *Dead Man Walking*, *Moby-Dick*, and *It's a Wonderful Life* each engaged different parts of my creativity, and sound very different as a result.

Intelligence began taking shape eight years ago. That's when I first heard the story of two Richmond women—Elizabeth Van Lew and Mary Jane Bowser—who ran a pro-Union spy ring during the Civil War. It's an incredible story: Van Lew was from an aristocratic family, and Bowser was an educated slave with a photographic memory. Together they helped turn the tide of the war. The story captivated me, and I haven't been able to let go of it since. We're going to tell it with dance, led by our director and choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, founder of the Brooklyn company Urban Bush Women. And it will be voiced by some of the greatest opera singers in the world, with beautiful set and production design.

But this is what opera is supposed to be, at its best: the creation of great beauty, compelling drama, and possibility. It's not about winning or losing, as if opera were a sports contest. It's about everybody—composers, librettists, cast, musicians, crew, even the audience—working together at the highest level possible. There's a way in which everyone involved actively participates in the building of something that exceeds them individually. The stakes are incredibly high, because if anyone is off, it affects the whole production. A great night of opera, when it happens, is incredible—a miracle, really.

GO: I imagine it must be somewhat difficult to attend premieres of operas you've composed and not be able to control the performance—you're not a conductor, for instance, so you won't be conducting the Metropolitan Opera's opening night performance of *Dead Man Walking*. What's it like to watch your creation unfold under such intense circumstances?

JH: For some people, it's nerve-wracking. But for me, I am just there to send the most positive, supportive wishes I possibly can to everyone involved. Because it's not about me at all, it's not my night. It's something I put on paper and then let go—it's up to the performers to see what it means to them, to create something in the moment. All of my energy goes to supporting them so they can have the best night possible, to do work they're proud of.

But it's bigger than any single performer. Opera creates a powerful vibration, something truthful that resonates with an audience. That's why we're all there—and that's why I never say "this is 'my' opera." Because it literally takes a village. And it creates a village. It becomes "our opera," this thing that's out there that everyone takes ownership of, makes their own. Because when something *works* in a theater, that's what makes all the rehearsals and revisions and cuts worth it—that's what I love more than anything.

XIAO SITU

Dancing Around Death

'Death Is Not the End'

Growing up, I learned to approach death and the afterlife not with dread but with a sense of excitement. Every April, my extended family—like many throughout the Chinese diaspora—observed the Confucian holiday of Tomb Sweeping Day. We would gather at Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn to visit the graves of my paternal grandfather and several other relatives. First, we'd tidy up the greenery around their tombstones, add fresh flowers, and lay out elaborate picnics of food and wine above their graves. Then, we'd burn incense sticks and spirit money so they could buy items they'd need in heaven. A whole roasted pig was also part of the picnic offerings. It's a common practice of this tradition, one we still observe to this day.

No matter where it's celebrated, Tomb Sweeping Day is a joyous, festive occasion, not at all somber. Children laugh as they chase each other around the graves. Adults share stories about their departed loved ones while eating their fill of tasty dishes. The food and flowers and incense are offerings to the dead, but so are the laughter and conviviality among those gathered. They are channels through which those buried beneath are reintegrated into the community above.

Death Is Not the End, on view at New York City's Rubin Museum until January 14, 2024, is also a kind of offering, gently inviting visitors to ponder their ambivalence surrounding this ineluctable feature of human existence. The show gathers fifty-eight works of Tibetan Buddhist and European Christian art from across twelve centuries, gracefully illuminating how the two religions understand death and the afterlife. (As a cross-cultural religious person, the show felt deeply personal to me; I am Christian, my parents are Buddhist, and together we observe many traditions of Chinese folk religion, which draws from Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism.) Instead of dwelling on differences, curator Elena Pakhoutova has thoughtfully organized these beautiful prints, paintings, and ritual objects around three major themes that the two religions hold in common. There's "The Human Condition," which emphasizes the inevitability of mortality that awaits all living beings; "States In-Between," addressing ideas of purgatory, limbo, and the bardo; and "(After)-life," centered on images of resurrection, transformation, and heaven.

Circle and orb motifs recur throughout the show, visually linking many of the works on view. One of the most magisterial appears in *Wheel of Life*, a nineteenth-century Buddhist scroll painting featuring Yama, the Lord of Death. For those new to Buddhism, this allegorical work is an indispensable pictorial guide to one of its central ideas: reincarnation. Here Yama's appearance is imposing as he stares directly out at viewers with three bulging eyes. His head is piled high with spiraling locks and crowned with a garland of skulls. A tiger-skin garment drapes down his thighs while gold circlets adorn his ears and ankles. Green serpents writhe around his shoulders and shins.

Yet Yama is quite literally eclipsed by the enormous round disk that he lifts with his taloned fingers. This is the titular Wheel of Life, a representation of the Buddhist belief in samsara, the repetitive cycle of birth, death, and rebirth that all living things must undergo. From the central hub to the outer rim, the wheel is divided into four circular sections illustrating the myriad figures, realms, and states of consciousness that propel the wheel's rotation. At the center of the wheel we find three symbolic animals. The pig, snake, and rooster represent ignorance, anger, and desire—what Buddhism understands as the three root causes of suffering. Beyond this central hub lies a bisected black-and-white circle featuring a parade of human figures performing a spectrum of virtuous and non-virtuous actions. According to Buddhist belief, each living being's karma—the sum total of actions in the present and previous lifetimes—can determine the status of their next rebirth.

The next section of the wheel is the widest and most densely illustrated. It features deities, humans, and animals inhabiting six different landscapes. Some of the landscapes are filled with

Opposite:
Wheel of Life,
Tibet or Mongolia,
nineteenth century

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART/GIFT OF SHELLEY AND DONALD RUBIN

thick clouds or frothy waves. Others are populated by architecture or verdant trees and mountains. This ring represents the six realms into which a living being can be reborn: the realm of gods, demigods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell. Finally, the wheel's outer rim depicts human figures in the process of being reborn. The whole thing is punctured by Yama's sharp fangs—a mordant reminder that all existence is conditioned by death.

A similar circle motif appears in Pieter van der Heyden's 1561 engraving of *The Descent of Christ into Limbo*. Here Christ appears to float within a luminous orb as he enters the underworld to save the souls trapped there. The bubble acts as a kind of pure, protective shield against the horde of fantastical creatures and grotesque mechanisms occupying this crowded, chaotic realm. Visually, Christ's orb echoes the circular mandalas, or divine abodes, that house the All-Knowing Buddha in a series of paintings belonging to the Sarvavid Album (eighteenth to nineteenth century). In one of these, "Liberation from Hell," the Buddha sits cross-legged in a golden sphere surrounded by clouds. From his hand emanates a trail of white light that reaches down into hell, freeing the deceased from unfortunate rebirths.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, skeletal imagery is also ubiquitous throughout *Death Is Not the End*. One of the most striking examples is a carved ivory miniature of German or Netherlandish origin that takes the form of a worm-ridden skull (1500–1550). Originally, this macabre sculpture functioned as a memento mori and prayer bead. Those who held this object in their hands and traced its many bumps and crevices with their fingers would have been reminded of the material reality and eventual decay of their own mortal bodies. Nestled in prayerful palms, this sculpture likely compelled believers to reflect on—and perhaps revise—their decisions and actions in life.

Skeletons likewise appear frequently in Buddhist art, but with a radically different emphasis from their Christian counterparts. Here, they appear most frequently as Smashana Adipati, Lords of the Charnel Grounds. According to Buddhist traditions, Smashana Adipati

Pieter van der Heyden, *The Descent of Christ into Limbo*, c. 1561

LENT BY THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, HARRIS BRISBANE DICK FUND, 1926

Smashana Adipati (Lords of the Charnel Ground), Tibet, eighteenth century

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID DE ARMAS, RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART, 2012

inhabit cremation grounds and perform rapturous, joyful dances among the dead bodies. In two paintings, as well as in a terracotta sculpture and carved wooden table (eighteenth to nineteenth centuries), Smashana Adipati don garlands of skulls and wear colorful accessories around their heads and bodies. Their arms and legs are intertwined as they shake and romp in harmony. Surrounded by flames, they celebrate liberation from attachment to self and body. More important, though, is the fact that they dance and celebrate *on behalf of* the dead, not against them. Like members of my family on Tomb Sweeping Day, here the Smashana Adipati are helpers.

In a practice called *chod* ("cutting the ego"), Buddhists visit cremation grounds to meditate, recite verses, and invoke blessings on behalf of the dead. Sometimes they wear or use ritual implements made of bone—aprons, crowns, bracelets, drums, trumpets—to aid their practice. The practitioners engage in these rituals to ensure good rebirths for the dead, to liberate those who are trapped in hell, or to aid them through the bardo, the intermediate realm where each dead being's consciousness resides while awaiting rebirth.

At the end of the exhibit there's an interactive station where visitors are encouraged to perform a little ritual of their own. Prompts at a small table with chairs, pencils, and cards invite responses to the following questions: *Tell us how death might not be the end. What is rebirth to you? Describe your perfect afterlife. How does believing—or not believing—in the afterlife impact how you live?* Museum staff then pin up the cards along clotheslines against the wall so that others can read the responses.

Although I don't personally know any of the visitors who replied to the prompts, I enjoyed reading their responses and felt a bond with them by virtue of sharing in the same discussion. Too often, if and when we acknowledge death at all, we think of it in strictly negative terms. That's not to dismiss the grief of loss, or the tragic finality of mortality. But our culture exhibits an increasingly pathological insistence on living forever, heedless of any and all restraints—just think of the compulsive consumerism championed by Jeff Bezos, or the techno-utopianism propagated by Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk. It's not difficult to see how it all might come crashing down.

Our culture exhibits an increasingly pathological insistence on living forever, heedless of any and all restraints.

Such resistant attitudes toward death are not just unsustainable. They also rob us of opportunities to cultivate compassion and solidarity, to hold attitudes and perform actions rooted in the recognition of our common vulnerabilities and limitations. The never-ending extension and maximization of life for its own sake actually leaves us with a much poorer version of human life—one in which mutual care, interdependence, and communion have been squeezed out and shunted aside.

Both Christianity and Buddhism, the Rubin show reminds us, have abundant resources for thinking more fruitfully and holistically about death. All the more so when they partner together instead of remaining siloed off from each other. There's a reason both make ample use of the circle, a shape that symbolizes continuity and connection. It's true that one day, we are all going to die. But we need not assume that we go through death alone, or that it gets the last word.

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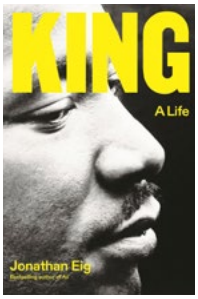
How We Misremember MLK

VINCENT LLOYD

"As it is with candles, so it was with him: the more light he gave, the less there was of him." This is how the novelist Charles Johnson imagines Martin Luther King Jr., a man whose self recedes as his commitment to the struggle for justice deepens. At the start of his public life, King put on a mask when he entered the spotlight; in the years immediately preceding his death, at age thirty-nine, there was nothing left except the mask. King the man was hardly there at all.

In *Dreamer*, Johnson's 1998 novel inspired by King's final months, the civil-rights leader takes a body double who embraces all that is human in a way that King the icon cannot. Where King is earnest, his body double is crude and cynical; where King is stoic and selfless, the other is flagrantly egotistical. Yet the two men so resemble each other that audiences cannot distinguish them: King becomes two men at once, holy and profane.



KING
A Life
JONATHAN EIG
Farrar, Straus and Giroux
$16.99 | 688 pp.

What Johnson conjured in fiction, Jonathan Eig meticulously documents in his new biography of King. The steadfast moral beacon whose image is now chiseled in stone on the National Mall was actually troubled and all too human. Appreciating the folds of King's character ought to inspire us to appreciate his leadership more, not less—so Eig would have it.

King liked to do impressions of his colleagues. He liked to tell jokes and to play jokes. In Memphis, just before his assassination, he called his mother and passed the phone to his brother mid-sentence, trying to trick her. (She noticed.)

Martin Luther King Jr. speaks at a press conference on June 8, 1964.

WALTER ALBERTIN/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION

King could be lighthearted, but he was also dragged into melancholy, what today would likely be diagnosed as clinical depression. He was hospitalized for one of these spells when he learned he was awarded the Nobel Prize; he conducted a press conference from the hospital auditorium.

While King famously proclaimed, in his final speech, that God had allowed him to go to the mountaintop and glimpse the promised land, Eig shows that in reality it was his wife Coretta who enabled and guided the great orator's moral ascent. She was an activist before he was; she was outspoken on Vietnam before he was; she was forever giving him confidence when his spirits wavered. Plus, she was birthing and caring for four children and an extraordinarily busy household on a tight budget. (King donated all of his speaking fees to civil-rights work.) At the civil-rights movement's height, Coretta traveled frequently to sing at rallies, always checking in to make sure her children made it to their extracurriculars. When King was called away from the founding meeting of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Coretta filled in for him.

As a father, King was engaged and playful—when he was around. He traveled so much that his young son, Martin Luther King III, longed to be a pilot when he grew up so they could travel together. When King was in Atlanta, a typical day included an hour or two in the evening with his family before he was off again, sometimes to a colleague's home to strategize, sometimes to one of his lovers' homes. Among his inner circle, King's adultery was no secret. Coretta found out, too, if not from gossip, then from the tape recording that the FBI sent, though she was reluctant to believe that King was unfaithful.

Using newly released records from the FBI, Eig demonstrates how what started as J. Edgar Hoover's usual obsession with chasing Communist shadows transformed into an obsession with King's sex life. How different the media norms were in those days: despite the FBI shopping evidence of King's adultery to many outlets, including those unsympathetic to King, the story never made it into print. The personal life of political figures was off limits.

One way we misremember King is to erase his humanity, making him all holy, all the time. Another way we misremember King is to mishear his message. It is tempting to focus on his famous phrases that sound uplifting and uncontroversial. This means turning away from King's own books and most of his articles, sermons, and speeches to focus primarily on his immortal oration delivered in 1963 before the Lincoln Memorial. Before two hundred thousand mostly Black marchers, King spoke of "the solid rock of brotherhood," the need to reject "drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred," and the day when children "will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." In short, it is tempting to read King as an advocate for interracial solidarity and for color-blind public policy.

Moderates and conservatives who imagine themselves to be championing King's vision today perform a sleight-of-hand. They take King's opposition to racism and his vision of a future without it to mean that he believed race is an aspect of the human condition that we ought to ignore. But this conclusion is absurd: King was a Black preacher, promoting justice for Black Americans, facing opposition not only from avowed white supremacists but also from white moderates (the addressees of his "Letter from Birmingham Jail"). The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, led by King, was designed to be a Black-led organization with white allies only in supporting roles.

The reason King is so frequently misread has less to do with his Black identity than with his Christian identity. Because he was a Christian, not only a preacher but a theologian, he was able to keep two time horizons in mind at once. There is God's time, so far in the future that we can only access it in our dreams. In that dream-time, as he proclaimed to the crowd, "little Black boys and Black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers." But that is not the time in which mere mortals live, and it is not the time in which politics operates. In this more familiar, worldly sense of time, Black folks need to join together to build political power and to lead attacks on racist laws and practices. When the phrase came into vogue, King had no trouble joining in the chorus shouting, "Black is beautiful."

For King, that mysterious realm of the divine conjured in dreams is tethered to the practical realities of our world by natural law. Human nature makes accessible some parts of God's law, and we notice that God's law is contrary to the world's law—for example, to the laws of the state of Alabama that required segregated seating on public transportation. From the initial mass meeting in Montgomery, when King stepped into the spotlight for the first time, he invited his audience to notice the mismatch between human and divine law, and to respond with collective action. In short, King was not advocating for race-blind public policy; he was advocating for an end to racist policies because they had no place in the Kingdom of God. To move in the right direction, toward that Kingdom, often requires race-conscious policies, and racial pride.

Some progressive devotees of King distinguish a later, "radical" phase in his political career, a phase that often corresponds to a shift in his primary audience from Black Christians to white secularists. But Eig shows that this narrative is too simple. Throughout his public career, King spoke and wrote as a Black Christian. His push for economic and housing justice in the last years of his life, which took a toll on his national popularity, was motivated by his belief that poverty ran against God's law. The same was true of his opposition to the Vietnam War, which sunk his popularity even more. The way these convictions flowed from King's Black Christianity was not always explicit: as his fame grew, he was surrounded by aides and ghostwriters who shared

It is incomplete to say that King held true to his convictions. He held true to God, and his moral convictions followed from that faith.

King's political conclusions but were uncomfortable with his theological reasoning. Indeed, Eig reminds readers that King's most famous speech on Vietnam, delivered at Riverside Church in 1967, was composed almost entirely by others.

King persisted in his convictions even when they weakened his standing in the eyes of the public. He rejected worldly political calculus as the final criterion of what course of action to pursue. For him, God had the last word, not human beings. It is incomplete to say that King held true to his convictions. He held true to God, and his moral convictions followed from that faith.

Today, in a significantly more secular cultural context, racial-justice advocates sometimes struggle to explain why we should step beyond the demands of worldly political calculus. If "abolish the police" polls badly, wouldn't it make sense to substitute another slogan, another policy goal? But then again, the slate of racial-justice issues today is quite different from the issues faced by King and his cohort.

Or is it? Eig is particularly effective at gently reminding readers that there are striking parallels between the way racial justice was framed in the 1950s and '60s and the way it is framed in the 2010s and '20s. In his 1963 book *Why We Can't Wait*, King called for reparations for the unpaid wages Black Americans should have earned during slavery. At a Chicago press conference in 1965, King talked about the way that contemporary racial inequities were a continuation of the U.S. slave system. After the 1966 Watts uprising, King told Mike Wallace that "a riot is the language of the unheard."

Particularly resonant is Eig's reminder that demands to end police violence were at the heart of the civil-rights movement. Yes, protesters wanted an end to segregation, but what drew thousands of protesters into the street and glued millions around the world to their television screens was police violence against unarmed Black Americans. And the police violence caught by cameras was only the tip of the iceberg: when the sun went down all over the South (and North), in cities and in the country, during traffic stops and in homes, police officers beat, maimed, and sometimes murdered Black Americans on the flimsiest of pretexts. Police officers were cruel, but so was the rest of the ostensibly even-handed justice system. We forget that King was often arrested not for breaking the laws of segregation but for breaking court injunctions against *protesting* segregation. The whole system was rotten.

The moral philosopher Susan Wolf once offered a provocation: we shouldn't aspire to become moral saints. In fact, the life of the moral saint may be very far from the good life. If a moral saint is someone who tries to be as good as possible with every action they take, then their extreme cultivation of the moral virtues might crowd out all the non-moral virtues. The moral saint cannot enjoy good music, books, or wine; that would take time and energy away from helping others and bringing justice to the world. The moral saint would have to be earnest and humorless, for humor requires detachment from the pursuit of goodness.

We are tempted to imagine King as a moral saint, exceedingly earnest with a single-minded focus on improving the world. That is not who King was. Nor does it describe Christian saints. It is only from a secularist perspective that saintliness is measured by maximizing good actions at each moment in time. In the hagiographical tradition, Christian saints have good days and bad days. They curse God and they repent. Their virtues battle their vices. Their saintliness comes about because of their commitment to bringing the shape of their life into conformity with the life of Christ, not moment-by-moment but as a whole. And saints necessarily fail at this: a saint imitates Christ, but a saint is not Christ. Nonetheless, a saint provides inspiration for those who, similarly, wish to model their lives on perfect goodness.

At his best, King approached this sort of saintliness. He allowed his commitment to the kingdom of God to trump worldly interests without forgetting about the world. He recognized, condemned, and mobilized against evil, whether it was the black and white of segregation laws or the insidious vice of moderation in the face of injustice. He used his unmatched gifts as an orator to move bodies and consciences.

At his worst, King forgot the difference between imitating Christ and becoming Christ. He took unseemly pleasure in redemptive suffering, which distracted from organizing for justice. He told his followers that the more pain they were in, the more justice would be achieved. When King embraced this fantasy of total selflessness, he turned to womanizing, he abandoned his family, he turned melancholic. It was as if his quest for saintliness precipitated the crude body double that Charles Johnson imagined for him, the anti-King who would claim "All narratives are lies.... Words are just webs. Memory is mostly imagination."

Jonathan Eig has written a biography that points us to King at his best, to King convinced that words bear truth, that narrative moves us toward goodness, and that memory, well preserved, carries beauty that motivates and inspires.

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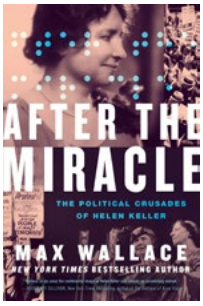
Helen Keller, Christian Socialist

NICK TABOR

It was late 1952, and the World Council of Peace was organizing a conference in Vienna. Diplomats and leftist scholars planned to converge on the Austrian city to denounce America's aggressive stance toward the Soviet Union, and to advocate for Joseph Stalin's vision of a "peaceful coexistence" between the two. Just one month before the gathering, the organizers announced they had received an endorsement from an American icon: Helen Keller, then seventy-two years old.

Keller's leftist sympathies were known to anyone who had been paying attention. For decades, she had publicly extolled Vladimir Lenin as one of the greatest figures of her time. More recently, though, people close to Keller had been urging her to keep those opinions quiet. In a *New York Times* profile occasioned by her seventieth birthday, she seemed to take this advice, denouncing communism as "another kind of tyranny over human minds and bodies." But as the historian Max Wallace writes in his trenchant *After the Miracle: The Political Crusades of Helen Keller*, the *Times* article didn't represent Keller's true views. The profile was likely arranged by one of her powerful friends in the philanthropy world in a bid to rehabilitate her image.



AFTER THE MIRACLE
The Political Crusades of Helen Keller

MAX WALLACE
Grand Central Publishing
$30 | 416 pp.

But Keller's radicalism always tended to resurface. When her colleagues at the American Foundation for the Blind heard about her support for the Vienna conference, one of them dispatched a telegram to the others. For "GOD'S SAKE," it read:

> STOP ANY FURTHER ATTEMPTS ON THE PART OF HELEN KELLER OR ANYONE ELSE CONNECTED WITH THIS INSTITUTION TO WRITE ANY MESSAGE WHICH WOULD BE READ AT THE WORLD COUNCIL TO MEET IN VIENNA DECEMBER 10.

Ultimately Keller did agree to sign a clarification, asserting that she did not "believe in despotism in any form." But she declined to offer a blanket denunciation of Soviet Communism.

Many decades later, there's a disconnect in the way we remember Helen Keller. Her long, extraordinary career (she lived to be almost ninety) as an international activist was sustained by an incredible work ethic. She was so deeply invested in politics that she routinely read newspapers in several languages. She authored fourteen books, and delivered hundreds of speeches around the world. But for most of us, Keller's name conjures a sentimental image of a six-year-old girl at a water pump, her teacher Annie Sullivan spelling out the word "water" on her palm as Keller experiences the first flash of linguistic revelation. That scene—popularized in the 1962 film *The Miracle Worker*—puts Sullivan at the center of the story of Keller's life, and makes Keller a passive recipient, rather than an active agent, of social progressivism. One of the questions Wallace sets out to answer in *After the Miracle* is how that came to be.

Helen Keller reading braille, c. 1907

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Leftist radicalism was hardly part of Keller's birthright. She was born in northwest Alabama in 1880 to a wealthy family. Her father had been

Considering the efforts made to soften Keller's public image throughout her life, it's hardly surprising that her radical politics are little remembered.

a captain in the Confederate army and was distantly related to Robert E. Lee. He was also rumored to be the first Ku Klux Klan member in Alabama. But Keller was cut off from that environment at a young age. Annie Sullivan took over her education when Keller was six and brought her to the Perkins School for the Blind in Massachusetts the following year.

Keller was already famous by the time she reached adulthood. She was not the first deafblind person to learn to read and write, but the pace at which she acquired these skills, and the degree of her eloquence, was unmatched by others with her disabilities. By the time she was a teenager, she had spent time with William James, W.E.B. Du Bois, Mark Twain (who would become her dear friend), and Grover Cleveland.

Keller announced her socialist views to the world in 1912, several years after her graduation from Radcliffe College at Harvard. In a profile first published in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and later syndicated across the country, Keller decried the "social blindness" of Americans who failed to see "the fundamental conditions underlying relations between the workpeople and their employers." When the reporter suggested that poverty was applauded in the New Testament, Keller fiercely corrected him. When Christ said, "blessed are the poor," she explained, he only meant they'd be blessed in the future as compensation for their suffering.

Wallace, a journalist-turned-historian, has produced an eclectic body of work. He's published volumes on Muhammad Ali's fight with the Vietnam draft board, the death of Kurt Cobain, and Henry Ford and Charles Lindbergh's support for the Nazis. Here his treatment of Keller's politics is deft and thorough; it's also sympathetic. As Wallace shows, there's been a tendency, going back to Keller's earliest activist days, to dismiss the radicality of her views in ableist terms—that is, by suggesting that Keller couldn't think for herself. Like scholar Kim Nielsen, author of the 2004 book *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller*, Wallace simply takes Keller at her word.

The 1910s were Keller's busiest decade as an activist. She campaigned for women's suffrage and against America's entry into the First World War. In both cases, her explanations were rooted in economics: she hoped that giving women the ballot would lead to socialism, and she denounced the conflict in Europe as a "capitalistic war," calling for a "general strike" to halt war preparations. Her socialism, in turn, was grounded in her faith. From age sixteen onward, Keller was devoted to the teachings of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, whose devotees had long been linked with Christian socialism. Later in life Keller referred to Christ as "Him who stood with the oppressed and the defrauded." Her faith also informed her advocacy for civil rights. "How dare we call ourselves Christians?" she asked in an open letter to the NAACP in 1916, noting the prevalence of lynchings that took place in the South. "The outrages against the colored people are a denial of Christ."

Wallace's account is hardly a hagiography, though. Keller's worst moral blunder also occurred in the 1910s—a glaring departure from her usual stance of compassion. In 1915, Keller voiced support for eugenics. Writing in a Pittsburgh newspaper, she defended the decision of a surgeon and a mother to let a disabled newborn die in the hospital, rather than performing a dramatic surgery to save the boy's life. Wallace isn't the first to point out that such views were not uncommon among the Progressive Era's socialist Left. They developed out of an idealistic—but horribly misguided—sense that eugenics could alleviate suffering in future generations. Keller's comments follow this idealistic tack, describing the surgeon's decision as a "service to society" as well as to the child, who she said was "spared from a life of misery." There's an undeniable cold-bloodedness in her remarks. (Keller did later reverse his stance on eugenics, and was among the first Americans to denounce Henry Ford for his anti-Semitism.)

Keller worked tirelessly as a young woman, but her projects didn't always produce financial rewards. Money was often a problem, and she was sometimes forced to make compromises to support herself and Sullivan. On one level, she resented modern philanthropy as it was practiced by the Carnegies and Rockefellers, seeing their largesse as a symptom of the political and economic ills that concentrated wealth in the hands of a few. "I regard philanthropy as a tragic apology for the wrong conditions under which human beings live," Keller wrote to a friend in 1944. At the same time, she couldn't help but depend on it in her own life. A Standard Oil executive had helped fund her college education, and in 1912, she reluctantly started accepting a $5,000 yearly stipend from Andrew Carnegie. (Ironically, this money went a long way toward supporting her radical activism.)

In 1924, Keller herself started working in philanthropy full time as the chief fundraiser for the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB). This marked the end of her political activity for some fifteen years. Whether her silence regarding politics was a condition imposed on her or a decision she made voluntarily is impossible to know, Wallace argues. Either way, the effect was the same.

Another of the strengths of Wallace's book is the light it shines on Keller's political resurgence during the 1940s. Even leftists have tended

to overlook this part of her biography. When the labor historian Philip Foner compiled a selection of Keller's political writings for a Marxist press in 1967, most of his selections were drawn from the years between 1911 and 1925. "This roughly fifteen-year chapter of her life has often been portrayed as a 'phase' that Helen eventually outgrew," Wallace writes. Even Nielsen had concluded that Keller became a "cold war liberal" later in life.

Wallace, by contrast, makes a persuasive case that Keller's views never really changed—if anything, she moved further to the left. Though Keller criticized Stalin, and described the Moscow Show Trials of 1936 as "sickening," she remained sympathetic to the Soviet project. In 1945, Keller visited the Soviet consulate in Manhattan to celebrate the twenty-eighth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution. "Finally I am on Soviet Soil," she said upon entering. Based on Keller's changing attitudes toward World War II—she had opposed American intervention in 1940, then changed her mind in 1941 after Germany invaded the Soviet Union—Wallace argues that Keller must have been a Fellow Traveler, an unofficial member of the Communist Party USA. (1941 was also when the American Communist Party reversed its stance on the war.)

Ultimately, Keller's duties at the AFB reined in her politics yet again. In the late 1940s, it was widely reported that Keller was being investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee. This put the AFB leadership on edge, since it threatened their fundraising. Together with AFB trustees, the director effectively halted Keller's political work in the late 1940s, according to documents Wallace cites.

Considering the efforts made to soften Keller's public image throughout her life, it's hardly surprising that her radical politics are little remembered more than five decades after her death. To a large extent, her legacy has been shaped by the same economic forces that she railed against for so many years.

Show-business executives were perennially drawn to Keller. For obvious reasons, they preferred to frame her life as a simple story about overcoming disabilities, not as an ongoing struggle against capitalism, sexism, and racism. This pattern took hold as early as 1919, when the silent film *Deliverance* was released. It culminated in 1962, when *The Miracle Worker* netted two Academy Awards: Anne Bancroft won Best Actress for her portrayal of Annie Sullivan, and Patty Duke won Best Supporting Actress for playing Keller.

But as Wallace argues, the movies are not uniquely to blame for obscuring Keller's socialism. Biographer Joseph Lash's seminal *Helen and Teacher* also downplayed the evidence of Keller's communist sympathies in the 1940s and '50s—in some cases discarding material that went against his thesis. Wallace presents new evidence that Lash had signed a contract with the AFB, giving the organization editorial control over the biography in exchange for exclusive access to Keller's papers. Later biographers simply accepted Lash's characterizations at face value.

In exhuming Keller's true politics, Wallace has given us a fuller picture of one of the twentieth century's great Christian radicals. In his telling, Keller is notable for much more than her communicative abilities. Despite occasional moral lapses, she lived a life of true integration. Her love of Christ; her critiques of capitalism, racism, sexism, and ableism; and her work as an activist—all of them, Wallace shows, came from the same place.

NICK TABOR *is the author of* Africatown: America's Last Slave Ship and the Community It Created, *published by St. Martin's Press. His work has appeared in the* New York Times, *the* Washington Post, New York Magazine, Smithsonian, *the* Paris Review, *and elsewhere.*

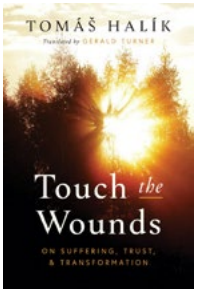
Wisdom for Any Season

LUKE TIMOTHY JOHNSON

The risen Christ shows himself in the wounds of the world. This is the apparent paradox—actually, the heart of the good news—that organizes this set of thirteen reflections by the Czech priest Tomáš Halík. The essays were composed in 2008, and the preface to the English translation was written on Easter of 2020—most appropriately, for Halík's thoughts center on the paschal mystery of death and resurrection, not as events of the past but as realities that challenge the present.

The scriptural passage that grounds his thought is John 20:24-29: Jesus appears a second time to his gathered disciples and shows his wounds to the doubting Thomas, who declares, "My Lord and my God." Halík draws the intended inference, that as the exalted Lord Jesus bears even in his resurrected body the wounds of his human suffering, so is he to be identified with the fresh wounds of suffering humanity. But in Thomas's declaration of Jesus as "God," another truth is disclosed: the Christian God is one who has in Christ identified himself fully with—has participated in—the suffering of all the world, and by doing so has enabled human wounds to be transformed.

Halík offers a vision of Christian existence that is kenotic and thoroughly anti-triumphalistic. He eschews the vision of "Christ the Victor" that he more than once associates with American "Evangelicals" and "fundamentalists," who enthusiastically fill auditoriums with joyful noise. His starting point is rather the suffering that he has witnessed in his travels among the poor and oppressed of the world. But he observes that people are not only wounded materially; the acute secularization of "advanced" societies has caused suffering of a more subtle but no less hurtful sort, the wound of the loss of meaning that makes it difficult even to speak of God.



TOUCH THE WOUNDS
On Suffering, Trust, and Transformation

TOMÁŠ HALÍK
TRANS. BY GERALD TURNER
University of Notre Dame Press
$25 | 170 pp.

The multi-dimensional Halík combines the traits of the philosopher, sociologist, psychologist, theologian, and activist, and serves as the pastor of St. Salvador Parish in Prague. His many interests appear in various ways in the separate essays of this volume, as he engages in a number of intellectual debates (most of them involving his long-time sparring partner, Nietzsche), and social commentary, alongside essays—perhaps originally homilies—that focus on the fundamentally pastoral character of his theme.

The prose in most of the pastoral essays is unadorned and clear. Surely such clarity is not due to the translator, Gerald Turner, but to the homiletic instincts of Halík himself. In contrast, the four essays that are more obviously philosophical or theological in the continental fashion—"Arcana Cordis," "A Torn Veil," "A Dancing God," and "Worshipping the Lamb"—are difficult even for a reasonably knowledgeable reader to appreciate. They clearly serve to give Halík the opportunity to position his thought within the universe of professional thinkers. But they are stylistically congested, clotted with technical terms (in Latin) and constant reference to intellectual authorities. They have the feel of academic exercises (perhaps even journal articles?) that seek more to display knowledge than to pursue wisdom.

The simpler—and in my view also more profound—essays each offer readers a dimension of the wisdom that begins

Caravaggio, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, c. 1601

SANSSOUCI PICTURE GALLERY/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

with the fear of the Lord. These reflections have no trace of academic posturing. They are themselves exercises in the kenotic theology that risks the vulnerability of naked thought exposed to public view, not unlike a body baring its wounds to the gaze of others. The opening essays, for example, "Gate of the Wounded" and "Without Distance," form a set of Easter reflections, developing the distinctive witness of Thomas among Jesus' disciples, namely to stand as witness between two kinds of "fundamentalist" assertions: the one from the side of believers that claims to possess God as "a given," and the other from the side of atheists that claims "there is no God." Thomas represents those who resist such flat reductions and see God as a possibility and a challenge, who find themselves in thought and action within a dialectic movement that includes doubt, rather than in a fixed position of certainty.

A second set of essays focuses on the woundedness of humanity in its contingent and alienated condition. In "Stigmata and Forgiveness," Halík draws on another theme in the Johannine resurrection passage: the wounded (stigmatic) Jesus sends Thomas and the other disciples to continue his own mission of forgiving sins by them in turn forgiving the sins of others. Halík reflects on the remarkable example of John Paul II seeking out his would-be assassin and offering him forgiveness. Being wounded is not a basis for retreating from humanity or for seeking revenge. It is, rather, an empathic lens that allows the forgiveness of others, who are viewed as also wounded.

Similarly, "Knocking on the Wall" extends the theme of forgiveness to embrace intercessory prayer for those who have wounded us. This powerful essay takes its point of departure from the striking statement of Simone Weil (which also appears as an epigraph fronting the book): "Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing that separates them but is also the means of communication. It is the same with us and God. Every separation is a link" (*Gravity and Grace*). Thus, Halík argues, being wounded is a threat to meaning, but it is at the same time an invitation to understand "meaning" at a still deeper level. And here he speaks of prayer as "God's forge, in which we are to be, in the words of the gospel, remelted and forged into God's instrument." God's answer to our prayers is to enable a faithful life of hope that extends love even to those enemies who do not will our good and even seek to harm us.

In two essays, the reader hears the voice of Halík as a critic of the secular worldview that distorts meaning and thereby wounds humans. In "Bodies," he recounts the challenge he posed to the exhibition in European and American cities of the "artfully" preserved and posed cadavers of actual people presented as masses of muscles and sinews and nerves, dead bodies in the simulacra of life. The exhibition drew massive crowds of the pruriently curious in the same locales where the display of crucifixes in the classroom had been forbidden. Halík's essay exposes the "taboo-breaking" nature of the "educational" display and presents this objectification and commodification of the dead—the cadavers are simply objects whose appeal lies only in the shock value they represent—in contrast to the mystery of death as celebrated by faith. Likewise focused on contemporary culture is "A Little Place for Truth," which takes its origin in a televised conversation with politicians, when, off-camera, Halík asked his interlocutor whether there might be a "little place" for truth amid the conscious ideological position-taking at the heart of modern politics—a question met with incredulity. It is not simply that all discourse is regarded as relative, Halík notes, but that any question concerning the truth in any context is regarded as an arrogant and hegemonic power play. His essay probes the way in which disciples might "witness to the truth" in such a disordered world in imitation of Jesus, not with an arrogant assumption of personal possession, but in the humble posture of seekers.

In "Wounds Transformed," the themes of trust and transformation stated by the book's subtitle are made explicit. Once more, the wounds of which he speaks are less those of physical hurt than of spiritual distress and alienation, from others whom we fear as enemies and from ourselves whom we don't trust sufficiently to be honest. Halík connects the two: "The first step to healing the world's wounds is our conversion, repentance, humility—or in everyday language: the courage to be truthful about ourselves." The wounds in ourselves begin to be healed, transformed, when they are accepted in trust. But what about the wounds that we have afflicted on others? Again, when we have made every effort to make amends and be reconciled, we must accept our finitude, "let go" what we have done, and place such wounds in the infinitely merciful hands of God.

The book's final essay, "The Last Beatitude," juxtaposes the eight beatitudes pronounced by Jesus to his disciples at the start of his ministry in Matthew 5:1-10 and the "beatitude" that Jesus pronounces in John 20:29 in response to Thomas's recognition of him as Lord and God: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Halík reflects on the character of genuine faith as a lifelong fidelity to God's call that inevitably involves moments of doubt like Thomas's, but that is found most truly not "in what we 'see' or 'think,' or what our convictions are, but [in] our hopes, our faith, and our love. These are what we must prove and demonstrate, so that more light may penetrate the dark recesses of the world."

Perhaps some readers will like most the essays in this book that demonstrate learning. My preference is for those essays that seek wisdom. They are the ones that make the book a fine resource for Lenten and Eastertide reading—or, for that matter, in any season when wisdom is sought.

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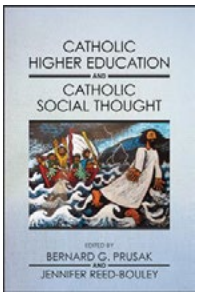
Graduates of Regis University in Denver during their commencement, April 30, 2022

CNS PHOTO/BRETT STAKELIN COURTESY REGIS UNIVERSITY

Do Catholic Colleges Have a Future?

NANCY DALLAVALLE

Like every other sector of the economy, Catholic higher education is subject to the larger forces of finance, government regulation, and broad cultural, technological, and demographic changes. These changes cannot be ignored or mastered; at best, they can be navigated with whatever skill and vision are available. In *Catholic Higher Education and Catholic Social Thought*, editors Bernard Prusak and Jennifer Reed-Bouley add another level of complexity to the challenges facing Catholic higher education: the clash of the common-good vision of Catholic social teaching with a regnant culture of neoliberalism, in which all aspects of higher education are viewed through the lens of market share and profit.



CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT

ED. BY
BERNARD G. PRUSAK AND
JENNIFER REED-BOULEY
Paulist Press
$34.95 | 271 pp.

Such a culture works better for some than for others. It is not news that your local Catholic college with an enrollment of around 1,500 undergraduates is scrambling. But how many know that Boston College's endowment assets reached $2.47 billion in 2019—exceeded, among Catholic schools, only by Notre Dame's $11.32 billion. While Matt Mazewski's contribution to this collection is careful to document the full range between these two poles, many Catholic colleges and universities (CCUs) are clustered at the low end, leaving them with few defenses in the higher-ed arms race. This impacts the delivery of the social mission of Catholic schools on many fronts: they struggle to pay their faculty and staff a reasonable wage; they struggle to offer scholarship dollars that would stave off overwhelming debt for students in need; and they are vulnerable to pressures to curtail or close humanities departments in favor of STEM and professional majors.

Catholic social thought—first officially formulated by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 in response to the economic conditions caused by the industrial revolution—has consistently

championed unions and other labor associations as a humanizing counter to modern capitalism. Most CCUs in the United States, however, have consistently resisted unionization, arguing that unions would subject them to government oversight and thereby infringe on their religious liberty. In his essay, Joseph A. McCartin reports that Georgetown University ($1.8 billion in endowment assets in 2019) has found a way around this problem by implementing a model for "private election agreements that do not involve the government," thus protecting the Jesuit university's Catholic character while meeting the socially just call for a "union." Because of its relative wealth, Georgetown is able to support the higher wages that result from unionization; unwilling or financially unable to follow suit, most other CCUs fall back on "religious liberty." McCartin lays out other important Catholic dimensions of the labor question. Faculties are now divided into two camps: "citizens" (tenured and tenure-track faculty) and "guest workers" (adjuncts). This painful fact is familiar to faculty members themselves, whose clarion calls for social justice tend to focus on the world "beyond campus gates."

The roots of Catholic social thought—its theological and anthropological basis—are often lost in campus discussions, which reduce it to a lightly christened version of secular social justice.

The roots of Catholic social thought—its theological and anthropological basis—are often lost in campus discussions, which reduce it to a lightly christened version of secular social justice. Acknowledging that Catholic social thought all too often appears on the radar of Catholic higher education only as a "cudgel for faculty to wield against the administration," the editors make their case for a much deeper appropriation of this tradition. The formation of senior administrators and boards of trustees often lacks a robust theological dimension. New presidents of Catholic colleges now commonly signal their relationship to the Catholic identity of their institution's founding order simply by "showing the flag" as a fan of the tradition in question. This book could have done with even more strategizing about how to develop a deep leadership bench for the future—an incoming provost or president usually doesn't have the time for this effort, given the practical demands of those roles. Administrators need guidance.

The contributors to this volume all understand that now is a critical moment for the Catholic character of these institutions, and that the failure to engage their Catholic mission is also a failure to engage some profound systemic issues for higher ed in general. Tia Noelle Pratt and Maureen O'Connell explain the racial dynamics at CCUs not merely as "a reflection of contemporary dynamics of racism in higher education," but also as a legacy of the Church's own participation in racism. Before dismissing this claim, predominantly white CCUs should ask themselves why it is that so many of them have gone from educating those at the margins, as they did in their early years, to a neoliberal strategy of *consolidating* the privilege of the already affluent. Similarly, as Michelle Gonzalez Maldonaldo notes, Latinos are significantly underrepresented in Catholic higher education, yet they are the Church's future: 60 percent of U.S. Catholics who are eighteen or younger are Latino. These young people are setting patterns and aspirations for their adulthood *right now*—and Catholic higher education is rarely on their radar.

Maldonaldo argues that inclusive policies in higher education need to be intellectual as well as demographic. The writings of Ignacio Ellacuría, SJ, for example, should be studied as the work of an important scholar—it is not enough to celebrate him as a martyr. Pratt and O'Connell also call for Catholic colleges and universities to recognize the lives and contributions of Black Catholics in their curricula as a complement to the work of implementing anti-racist policies. In this way, Catholic higher education would focus on the things it can impact the most: access to higher education for those disadvantaged by social forces, and scholarship that rigorously seeks to include the breadth of the human narrative.

Charting the movement of women into institutions that had previously been largely male enclaves, Reed-Bouley and Catherine Punsalan-Manlimos trace a startling reversal: women students now outnumber men, both at secular and Catholic colleges. At the leadership level, however, there remains a gap that is not merely numerical. Indeed, the foundational "Land O'Lakes" text, often cited as *the* key text for the institutional self-understanding of Catholic higher education in the United States, emerged from a bucolic retreat in 1967 that "excluded leaders from women's institutions." Institutional reflection on Catholic higher ed has yet to recover from that exclusion. While women are moving into senior administrative roles, the pattern of men talking to other men as "the serious voices" continues to this day, with "women's contributions…yet to be fully embraced, recognized or sought" in the conversation about Catholic leadership. (This volume is a welcome exception to that pattern.) In short, the old clericalism may be gone, but the patriarchal attitudes remain.

Catholic social thought offers an alternative—a fresh way to introduce the Catholic character of CCUs. In early March of this year, a "Dinner with the Dean" for new tenure-track faculty in the liberal-arts college at my institution sought to introduce the Catholic sensibility by asking the new faculty members to reflect on

Faculty have increasingly shifted their focus to procedures and protocols because there is so much disagreement among them on the basic content and purpose of their disciplines.

why their own scholarship, with all its disciplinary particularity, "matters" outside the walls of their department. The rich conversation led several of us to continue talking after the event was over. We pulled our chairs together to talk about the ramifications of artificial intelligence for our scholarship, including the questions AI raises for what it means to be human. That conversation would have been enhanced by a consideration of Vincent Miller's contribution to this volume. Tracking both the ontological and epistemological dimensions of *Laudato si',* Miller's essay highlights Pope Francis's concern with "the individual's entanglement within community and history." That encyclical's critical resistance to the "technological paradigm," with its implications for humanism and scholarship, may be a more interesting and fruitful point of departure for a discussion about the future of CCUs than another re-hash of *Ex corde ecclesiae*.

This approach might also help to counter the rising trend of "proceduralism" in departmental decision-making. Anna Bonta Moreland and Mark Shiffman find that faculty have increasingly shifted their focus to procedures and protocols because there is so much disagreement among them on the basic content and purpose of their disciplines. Administrators tend to do the same. This proceduralism may also reflect what Laura Nichols describes as a "decoupling" of mission, demographics, and institutional practice at CCUs. Nichols unpacks the data about Catholic higher education to show how market forces have pushed CCUs far from their original mission. To be clear: no one is suggesting that CCUs could or should go back to the way they were at their start; the question is how to live their mission now.

A month after that lively meeting with our first-year faculty, I sat in the same room for a meeting of the external board of advisors for my institution's college of arts and sciences. Two hours of updates and a few sparkling student presentations later, this event ended exactly as the earlier faculty session did, with several of us staying behind to talk more about AI—now in an atmosphere of heightened concern. Here is another opening for Catholic social thought to read and respond to the signs of the times. Is artificial intelligence going to be introduced in our schools with the same monetizing logic that already dictates so many administrative decisions? Of course. What will that mean for the faculty and staff at Catholic colleges and universities? Will it change how we present our core curriculum, or the skills and habits we strive to cultivate in our students—among them, the ability to read and respond to a text critically, hands-on lab experience, a humanizing engagement with the arts?

A recent essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* by a Columbia undergraduate demonstrated how easy it is to use AI to assist, step-by-step, with an essay-writing assignment. The author claimed that AI was "doing his thinking for him." This was not precisely true: what the article showed was a student with an already high level of literacy using AI to save time while producing sophisticated work. Not all my students are at that level, however, which is why teaching skills in writing and critical thinking are a primary focus of introductory courses in the humanities. Unless we are careful, this new iteration of the "technocratic paradigm" will turbo-charge the strongest, best-prepared students while leaving the rest even further behind. For many of them, AI will likely be more a means of escape—powering ever-more-seductive sports betting and "virtual girlfriend" apps—than an intellectual tool.

On April 13, the Sisters of Charity of New York voted to bring their congregation to "completion." Having faithfully provided decades of service, education, and prayer, yet recognizing that no new members had joined them for the past twenty years, they voted to close their congregation to new arrivals. Their story came to mind frequently as I read this book. What was remarkable about it wasn't the demographic trend to which the religious sisters were responding but the clear-eyed way they embraced the final pouring out of their common vision as they faced and read the "signs of the times." In the near future, while some CCUs will have similar decisions to make, all Catholic colleges and universities will need the clarity and courage of these women as they face a challenging future.

While more diagnostic than prescriptive, *Catholic Higher Education and Catholic Social Thought*'s richly detailed contributions map the current fault lines that threaten Catholic colleges and universities. This collection emerged from a years-long collaboration known as the Catholic Social Thought Learning and Research Institute, and this reader could tell that the essays included here were not written in isolation from one another but developed out of an ongoing dialogue among the contributors. Editors Prusak and Reed-Bouley should be commended for this work of service for Catholic colleges and universities, which brings challenging questions to bear on our current moment while offering a useful template for the hard conversations ahead.

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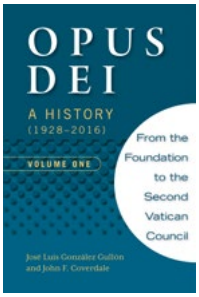
Self-Consciously Secular

DANIELE PALMER

To describe Opus Dei as mundane would likely strike most readers as odd, if not perverse. After all, the group has been embroiled in controversy since its birth, attracting criticism for its secretive practices, its members' collusion in Francisco Franco's dictatorship in Spain, and its often rigidly conservative beliefs. But the most literal meaning of "mundane" is "of this world"; and this is how Opus Dei understands itself, and how it has come to describe its charism. The key to understanding this group is ordinary secularity.

Throughout the history of Christianity, the tension between this-worldliness and otherworldliness has drawn many boundaries and defined countless identities. For someone like Augustine of Hippo, the two poles were quite clear: the realm of the transcendent is the City of God, the land of the promise of eternity; and the secular—*saeculum*—is the time between now and the Second Coming, before the wheat is sorted from the tares. To be self-consciously secular, or mundane, is to consider oneself wholly and truly of this age.



OPUS DEI
A History
JOSÉ LUIS GONZÁLEZ GULLÓN AND JOHN F. COVERDALE
Scepter
$29.95 | 272 pp.

And this is indeed how Opus Dei sees itself. In the two-volume *Opus Dei: A History*, two senior members of the group, José Luis González Gullón and John F. Coverdale, try to pin down the specific qualities that have given form to Opus Dei. And what they've come to see, nearly a century since the group was founded, is that it's inextricably tied to the ordinariness of this age, to "a message that unites the human and the religious."

Blessed Josemaria Escrivá de Balaguer speaks to a crowd at Barcelona's Brafa Sports Center in November 1972.

CNS FILE PHOTO FROM OPUS DEI

Opus Dei was founded by the priest Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer in Spain in 1928. During the Spanish Civil War, its members consolidated their presence in the country and strengthened their grip on its cultural, political, and professional circles. Few *Commonweal* readers will be unaware of Opus Dei's more than slightly unusual history. A novelty in the Church, it began garnering the approval of certain key figures, especially Popes Pius XII and John Paul II. This allowed it to grow from a small association of Spanish lay Catholics and a handful of priests to become a one-hundred-thousand-strong "personal prelature"—a special status in canon law that grants it jurisdiction over all its members, outside the geographical diocesan system.

Opus Dei's rapid ascent has been regarded with suspicion both inside and outside the Church. Its members are known for being fervently outspoken about their positions on such contested social issues as abortion and same-sex marriage (positions, it should be said, which many ordinary Catholics outside Opus Dei share and which reflect official Church teaching). Their belief in the rigid separation of the roles of men and women, with the latter being instructed by the group to serve the former, has led many to find them uncomfortably conservative, even reactionary. Yet this is not where they get the most flak.

Escrivá believed in the necessity of meeting God, and sanctifying oneself, within the ordinary responsibilities of everyday life. In concrete terms, this implied a total, wholehearted acceptance of the professions—forms of life distinctive of the modern age. Among the ranks of Opus Dei, it is common to find lawyers, bankers, academics, journalists, and politicians of significant status. Opus Dei prepares and guides its members to an extraordinary extent. They all receive attentive spiritual formation based largely on Escrivá's book *The Way*; many end up at one of the group's well-funded colleges and universities, institutions that offer the subjects that make up the modern *quadrivium*: philosophy, law, economics, and communications.

All this is designed to help the members of Opus Dei burrow deep into their workplaces—from banks and law firms to universities and government ministries—and to make the most of their professional careers. As one member once told me, they demonstrate through their professional activities how the gifts of Christianity are finely tuned by the instruments Opus Dei provides. A typical member of Opus Dei is a well-formed member of the professions with a well-articulated, albeit somewhat idiosyncratic, sense of what it means to be a modern Christian.

During the years of Franco's dictatorship, many of his closest allies and ministers were members of Opus Dei. The *opusdeístas*, as their critics would call them, staffed many ministries and offices that kept alive one of Western Europe's longest-lasting dictatorships. Yet as international commentators in the 1960s observed, these "ultra-Catholic" technocrats were also instrumental in delivering Spain from its only partly industrialized, mostly agrarian past. The *opusdeístas* brought the country, kicking and screaming, into the modern world. For their allies within Franco's regime, and those who still today hail them as the country's modernizers, they are considered trailblazers of rationalized statecraft and administration; to their critics, they were exploitative opportunists who instrumentalized Cold War free-market economics to keep Spain, morally and culturally, in a premodern limbo—a critique the authors of *Opus Dei: A History* don't have much to say about.

The truth lies somewhere between the two. It would be absurd to deny that many *opusdeístas* were complicit in some of the most unsavory aspects of Franco's regime, though many in Opus Dei write this off as more accidental than intentional. González Gullón and Coverdale claim that there's little in the political conduct of the *opusdeístas* that is specifically attributable to their membership in Opus Dei. "All members," they stress, "enjoy freedom in political and cultural matters." All Opus Dei does, they insist, is fulfill a "purely spiritual and evangelizing purpose." But the distinction here is too neat. Even if Franco's Opus Dei allies were not exactly controlled by their spiritual advisors, the convictions that motivated their work certainly did arise from the whole group's sense of what the modern world had to offer, and what needed to be changed.

González Gullón and Coverdale do venture some minimal reproaches of Opus Dei's past leadership. In 1956, in preparation for his fifth government, Franco approached several leaders of Opus Dei, asking for their advice on ministerial appointments. This marked the beginning of the group's intimate link with Franco's regime. Acting on the counsel of the priest Antonio Pérez Hernández, a senior member of Opus Dei, many *opusdeístas* were brought into the Francoist fold. González Gullón and Coverdale admonish Pérez, writing that he "clearly violated" Escrivá's wishes.

What the authors do not tell us is that Pérez had already made his aim clear two years before: "Ecclesiastical authority," he declared at a 1954 conference attended by many of Spain's political and religious leaders, "must have the possibility to produce legal effects." Pérez would later leave Opus Dei and the priesthood in 1959, but two years later, in a speech marking the creation of the Opus Dei–run University of Navarra, Escrivá thanked Pérez for his work and praised his guidance in front of hundreds of students, parents, and noteworthy public figures.

Some of Opus Dei's critics seem to miss what is most distinctive about the group. One may consider its moral views somewhat archaic, but it seems like a mistake to label a bunch of technically skilled financiers and politicos as premodern. The "mundanity" stressed by González Gullón and Coverdale offers a way out of this apparent contradiction. To embrace secularity implies, as Augustine would have it, giving oneself to history, and more specifically to the age in which one lives. This is, in one sense, diametrically opposed to what some call the "Benedict Option," whereby the faithful Christian retreats from the world and lives as a recluse in comfortably remote cloisters.

By contrast, to be of the age, or to give oneself to the ordinariness of

everyday life, requires that one not wholly repudiate those identities, values, and practices that make the present what it is. Opus Dei began at one of Western Europe's most significant junctures—when the sickly empires of early modernity gave way to international trade—and the group never tried to escape from the age to which it belonged: a modernity colored by the travails and hopes of an ascendent middle class. It had to learn the tricky moral and cultural steps of capitalism's awkward dance with Christianity.

In one sense, Opus Dei's modern mundanity can be summed up in Escrivá himself. Born into a middle-class family with unrealized claims to nobility, his studies at the seminary were accompanied by legal training. Even before his ordination, he believed it necessary to become a doctor of the law: jurisprudence, along with commerce, were the keys to society. Throughout his life, he would admire and praise figures capable of saving banks or lifting businesses out of bankruptcy. The luxurious decadence of the early-twentieth-century European nobility was denied him, but he did not look to the working classes and the movements they created for inspiration. His conservatism, and that of the movement he founded, were typical of the striving middle classes intent on technical competence and rational administration.

This formula didn't change much in the 1960s and '70s, years that marked Opus Dei's international expansion. Though the group is now present in more than eighty countries, its institutional culture remains similar to what it was from the start, a fact less surprising when one considers that almost half the group's members are Spanish and over one-third reside in Spain. The language González Gullón and Coverdale use to describe the period during which Opus Dei went international underscores the consistent moral and cultural conservatism of the group. Starting in the sixties, they write, many people began rejecting "a regulated world that sought economic prosperity." Seduced by "neo-Marxist and Freudian ideas," a "youth rebellion led to widespread public abuse of alcohol and drugs, as well as promiscuous sexual activity." All these "excesses," they comment, "were justified by a perceived right to self-satisfaction."

Many have noted that you won't find many members of Opus Dei defending society's poorest and most marginalized. That may be true, but then it's equally hard to find great numbers of non-Catholic white-collar professionals latching onto causes that do not immediately concern them. The source of the problem may not be Opus Dei itself, but the bourgeois worldview that many of its members, including its founder, represent: a way of engaging with the world that prioritizes extraction and use, that lacks sensitivity to the wants and needs of the less fortunate, and is chronically unaware of both one's complicity in the system and one's ability to facilitate transformation. All the cracks and blemishes in society are explained away as signs of growth and development and are to be met with ever-greater, ever-more-invasive technical solutions. This is what Pope Francis has called the "technocratic paradigm."

Nevertheless, what González Gullón and Coverdale have achieved in this work is striking: an impressive overarching narrative of Opus Dei's nearly century-long history. This chronologically ordered, textbook-like account of the group's evolution fills a real gap, providing valuable information not available even in John Allen's *Opus Dei: An Objective Look Behind the Myths and Reality of the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church*. But what is perhaps most remarkable about the book is how forthright its authors are about Opus Dei's blemishes, given that they are themselves members.

Their relative candor is no doubt part of the new strategy adopted by Opus Dei around the start of the 2000s. When the film version of *The Da Vinci Code* came out in 2006, the group once again returned to public attention, much of it hostile. But this time Opus Dei reacted differently. It did not hide behind the silence its founder extolled, nor did it mount a belligerent counter-offensive. Under the guidance of Juan Manuel Mora, Opus Dei's communications director, the group welcomed curious observers. Mora instructed the communications team to host them in the group's many residences and centers around the globe, to treat them well, to be open, and to answer questions—in short, to pull away the veil. In writing their book in the manner they have, González Gullón and Coverdale have done something similar.

But to many readers, Opus Dei will still seem like an oddity, no matter how much it's demystified. And in the context of the twenty-first-century Catholic Church, it *is* somewhat odd. For those following the raging arguments between self-styled "traditionalist" and "liberal" camps within the Church, a group so blissfully uninterested in these quarrels may seem a little out of step. A lot of what these Catholic cultural discussions stem from, on either side of the divide, is an attempt to recover Christianity from its corrupted state. The traditionalists think the Church went wrong by getting entangled with liberal modernity; the liberals think the pre-conciliar Church went wrong by chasing power instead of Christ-like love. Both sides think the Church has been polluted by history—or, one might say, by the mundane.

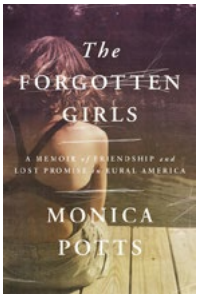
Precisely because of its own resolute mundanity, Opus Dei chooses not to follow suit. "I don't get the traditionalists," an Opus Dei member once told me. "What's so special about the Tridentine Mass?" The group welcomes history; it finds no reason to challenge modernity, but it remains convinced that the Church will never entirely give way to the pressures of a post-religious world. Material progress will prevail, but so will the Church, inevitably and unproblematically. And surely this is, for better *and* for worse, very similar to the way many ordinary Catholics see the relationship between their faith and the age they belong to.

DANIELE PALMER *lives in London, where he teaches history and works in community organizing.*

Monica Potts

The Problem of Darci

ROBIN ANTEPARA



THE FORGOTTEN GIRLS

A Memoir of Friendship and Lost Promise in Rural America

MONICA POTTS

Random House

$28 | 272 pp.

It all began with a statistic: white, working-class women in rural America were dying younger, and at a faster clip, than they had in a generation. Monica Potts, author of *The Forgotten Girls: A Memoir of Friendship and Lost Promise in Rural America,* wanted to know why. Potts grew up working-class and poor in Clinton, Arkansas, a tiny town of two thousand people in the foothills of the Ozarks. Statistics about her home state were just as alarming. Arkansas has one of the highest teen-pregnancy rates in the country, and the highest rate of childhood trauma (56 percent of children experienced at least one devastating event growing up). A Princeton University study described the accelerating mortality rate as "deaths of despair."

One bright spot in this otherwise dismal picture was Potts's childhood friendship with Darci—a charismatic extrovert with quicksilver intelligence and an impish grin. From the moment they met, the two girls were joined at the hip: listening to Janis Joplin in Potts's bedroom, studying side-by-side in the gifted-and-talented class, standing in line for free lunches in the school cafeteria. Their most enduring bond was that both girls hated their hometown with a passion. As fourth-graders, they began plotting their escape. They would drive to Fresno, California, as a high-school graduation present to themselves.

SAMIR SUAREZ

Fresno, about which they knew nothing, became a kind of Shangri-La.

However, by the time they'd entered eighth grade, there were already signs that not all was right with Darci. By their senior year, a chasm had opened between the two girls: Potts was awarded a huge scholarship to Bryn Mawr and named valedictorian of her class; Darci had essentially been kicked out of high school. When Potts arrived at college, she vowed to put the town of Clinton behind her, for good. "I could have continued to be friends with Darci, or with anyone from Clinton but I didn't want to, or really, I thought I couldn't. They were what I sacrificed. I excised them all from my life and went forward in college as if I had no history." Twenty-one years later, Darci reached out to Potts on Facebook and the two arranged to meet. In 2015, Potts traveled back to Clinton, and she was shocked by what she found: a drug-addicted single mom with only a GED to her credit. Darci was in and out of halfway houses and in and out of jail, her face a familiar sight on "Wanted" posters around the county. Potts had graduated from one of the nation's most prestigious women's colleges and was embarking on a career in journalism.

What had happened to her friend? *The Forgotten Girls* is Potts's attempt to find out. "I wanted to tell a story that statistics and data could not tell." Drawing on old diaries, medical records, and hours of interviews (with Darci and other Clinton residents), Potts's memoir is a brilliant ethnography not only of forgotten girls but of a forgotten America that most of us, most of the time, are happy to ignore.

The Forgotten Girls is also part of an ongoing conversation by writers who, like Potts, have triumphed over impoverished childhoods in rural America. However, unlike Tara Westover's *Educated* or J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*, Potts's main focus is the people left behind—and, above all, with Darci. Her downward spiral began, rather unremarkably, at age fourteen when she started sneaking out of the house at night to go to parties. Before long, she didn't have to sneak out, the parties came to her. A room in her parent's house, known to partiers around the county as "The Den," became a "24-hour clubhouse" complete with Xanax, Soma, and cases of beer. Her parents "were willfully blind to it," Potts fumed. But she was even more distraught with her friend's behavior. "It felt like her life was being consumed by unimportant things. Boys. Sex. Drinking. Partying. Why didn't she understand that leaving our hometown would demand the entire force of our beings?" Although the two remained friends, their bond was clearly fraying. "We reached an unspoken agreement that I didn't want to know about her partying because I didn't approve," Potts said. In their senior year of high school, Darci whited out the dates on a doctor's note excusing her from a week of school after she became pregnant (the note cited an "unspecified illness"—i.e., her miscarriage). She then spent seventy-eight days in the Den, where she smoked pot and did crystal meth. When she was found out, school officials informed Darci that, despite her high grades, she would not graduate. That fall, as Potts settled in at Bryn Mawr, Darci was working part-time shifts at Sonic, carhopping and pocketing tips of methamphetamine. When the two women reconnected ten years later, Darci had done time for an array of charges including drug possession and embezzlement.

The Forgotten Girls delves into the root causes of Darci's downfall. Although statistics do not tell the whole story, politics help fill in the blanks. The political argument illuminating Potts's narrative is that what happened to Darci is not her fault. One cannot fully understand the decline and fall of a gifted twenty-first-century woman without taking history into account. Potts cites a late nineteenth-century geological survey that deemed land in the region unsuitable for farming and susceptible to flooding. Despite these findings, the federal government promoted the area, advocating "rugged individualism" as a panacea for whatever challenges settlers might encounter. "American society left people to find prosperity where it couldn't be found," Potts noted. Waves of economic decline and collapse ensued, peaking with a devastating flood in 1982 and a series of economic traumas between 2000 and 2010.

Because of a lack of social services in the town, the only thing that people had to fall back on was the church. For 83 percent of Clinton's regular churchgoers, this meant Evangelical Christianity. Potts's family was one of the few in town that did not go to church. Perhaps as a result, she has an unapologetically jaded view of religion. As she saw it, support from the church (mainly Southern Baptists) did not come without a price. For women in particular, expectations were high. Good girls married young, had children, and were devoted helpmates to their husbands.

Over time, a tragic binary developed in the town: girls were either good or bad, students either geniuses or dropouts. Young people were either from good families or bad ones. If you had the misfortune of being born into a bad family, you were doomed. "People who tried to break the pattern were often alone, set against the larger forces of small-town thinking and small-town gossip." As Darci developed a reputation as a partier, hanging out with her became "increasingly fraught." Potts felt "trapped" by a system that made her choose between good and bad. Although she didn't fit into either category, she decided to align with the good kids. "I didn't have the power to ignore their judgments, so I became judgmental too."

Who or what is to blame for Darci's fate? In *The Forgotten Girls*, Darci is clearly a victim of the town's elitism and insularity, the church's judgment, and federal policies that encouraged people to settle in the area to begin with. I cannot disagree with Potts's summation. Social conditions are indeed the root problem of all the Darcis of the world. But the Darci of *Forgotten Girls* is also a victim of herself: a master manipulator whiting out dates on a doctor's

note; a con woman convincing doctors to prescribe drugs not only unneeded but downright dangerous; a prankster lying down in the middle of busy thoroughfares, not because she was trying to commit suicide but because "nothing stopped her" from doing so.

One conclusion that can be drawn from Darci's story is that she needed a tough love that she never got—not from parents who turned a blind eye to her partying, nor from teachers who didn't notice mounting absences until it was too late. Even Potts is too eager to make excuses for her friend, looking the other way in high school when Darci partied and skipped classes and, years later, avoiding the "honest conversations" that might have made a difference to her friend's life. Toward the end of the book, Potts laments Darci's apparent lack of interest in anything besides herself: "I wanted her to ask me about my life.… I wanted her to be curious about what I'd done…and why I'd been coming back home." However, her friend never asked about any of those things. "Instead, she talked, distractedly, about herself."

Although the burning questions at the heart of *The Forgotten Girls* relate to Darci's undoing, I have a couple of questions about Potts as well. A couple of questions, and a thesis: for all her apparent agnosticism, Monica Potts was touched by the divine. Consider the path by which she was able to rise above everything that dragged Darci (and others like her) into the abyss. This came to be as a result of a summer program she attended at Barnard during her sophomore year—one that happened "by chance." The Barnard experience was part of an elite pre-college summer program "usually meant for the children of very wealthy parents who want to improve their chances of admission"—and yet Potts was admitted. "I had heard about this one only because Momma had misread the name of a college on the back of a book jacket, because I'd happened to register for a college entrance exam early, because I'd followed up with a college that sent me promotional materials, and because I'd called the admissions office to say I couldn't afford it. It felt so naïve and accidental, yet it changed my life."

Accidental, perhaps. But why not providential? And what of her decision to return, permanently, to Clinton in 2017? The only reason she offers is that she had started to feel "at home" in Clinton, and that it would be easier "to keep in touch with Darci" if she returned. On the surface, it's a rather offhanded explanation. For me, though, it sounds like a calling. *The Forgotten Girls* is an invaluable examination of the complex challenges confronting the Darcis of the world. However, readers are largely left in the dark about what propelled Monica out of Clinton—and then back again. There are more stories waiting to be told, but we will have to wait until Potts's next memoir to read about them.

ROBIN ANTEPARA *teaches English at East Tennessee State University.*

THE SPECK IN HER EYE

Leslie Williams

I had never met a mind so perfectly
intoxicant, so redolent, so like a grove
of orange trees. Blossoms dazzling, but shaken
easily, maybe never to become fruit.

Some days our estrangement seems a simple case
of love cut down to fit
mature and separate realms, shaped by no-fault
circumstance, as way led on to way.

Other times I see my lips pressed hard in the judging look
we hated on our mothers, when boys brought home
did not remove their hats, nor ask to be excused.

If I try to see my friend from higher ground
she's wearing her fawn-colored coat outside the sorry
pizza place. Or sobbing under the bridge.

I see her waiting for the green line early, freshly
showered, starting again.
How she really tried. How she cannot help it.

LESLIE WILLIAMS *is the author of three poetry collections:* Matters for You Alone *(forthcoming from Slant Books in 2024),* Even the Dark, *and* Success of the Seed Plants. *Her work has appeared in the* Christian Century, Liberties, Image, America, *the* Kenyon Review, Poetry, *and others. She lives near Boston.*

Developing the Voice of the Laity

KAYLA AUGUST

The synodal listening sessions opened the door to hearing the voice of the laity in a new way, as parishes across the world were asked to share their stories, hopes, and disappointments about living within the Catholic Church in order to guide where it goes next.

Yet, according to the 2023 U.S. National Synthesis Report, dioceses entered the process with "a combination of excitement, confusion, and skepticism." In fact, "several dioceses noted some apprehension and even opposition as they began their synodal listening"—due, in part, to a feeling the process would be futile.

This sense of futility reflects a Church that is communal in nature but not yet communal in participation. Though we speak of a united Body of Christ, the synodal proceedings reveal the limits of the laity's words and actions in the face of ecclesial structures. In a Church where laypeople have been fashioned to receive and not to share, it's understandable that many are not simply unwilling but actually unable to make their voices heard. Breaking centuries of silence in the space of a four-year synodal session is bound to be a challenge, especially given that we perhaps failed to consider one of the preemptive needs for the synodal process: training lay voices to speak. I propose the laity may be experiencing what I call "acute ecclesial laryngitis," the inability to contribute to the life of the Church due to a lack of capacity to speak. In this synodal moment, we find the voice is a muscle, and the failure to use it results in a stifled and hesitant voice.

There are two things we can do to address this condition. The first is to focus on a better formation of the prophetic voice that our baptism gives us. The second is to develop a better understanding of what it takes to nurture a truly synodal Church. This will aid those in the Church not practiced in listening, as well as those in the Church not yet trained in speaking. In doing so, we can introduce a way of being a Church that has not been culturally practiced yet, while also moving closer to Francis's ideal vision that we are not just *practicing* synodality, but that we *are* a "synodal Church."

If we think of the synodal process as a way for the Church to preach the Good News, then we should approach it the way we prepare for a sermon. This is the moment when we pray and listen for the Spirit as we ready the Church to proclaim God's message for today. A good sermon starts before its proclamation. It is found as you *listen* to the needs of the community and consider how God may be calling you to speak. It means listening as the community shares their stories and their experiences of God. It means *not* assuming you know what they need even before you have met them. Preaching shows us, as synodality should, that if we do not hear, then we are not ready to speak.

In her book *Ingenuity: Preaching as the Outsider,* Vanderbilt professor of homiletics Lisa Thompson calls listening a "cultural act." Listening is a way of responding that is guided by the given cultural context, one we exercise even when we don't acknowledge it. In the Catholic cultural context, this would necessitate a new practice, not yet honed, whereby clergy listen to the laity and make themselves open to the wisdom possessed by those who've spent their lives in the pews listening to words from the pulpit. It flips the age-old image of leadership, since it requires the "shepherds" to turn their ears to the proverbial "sheep" and realize that they too have lessons to learn about who God is and what God is saying.

This will require patience and persistence from those in positions of power—but wisdom comes to those who wait. During the Synod on Youth in 2018, Pope Francis advised us to listen with humility and speak with courage. A new practice will invite those in power to respond with humility and see the laity as partners in the spiritual journey, and to call on the lay community to speak with courage in expressing the Spirit moving within them.

If the Church is truly a sign of God at work in the world, then it needs to model listening to those in society and in the ecclesial body whose voices have gone unheard and whose needs have been overlooked. Even as listening sessions come to a close, this courageous and humble mode of speaking

A priest listens to a migrant woman tell her story in San Antonio, Texas, May 25, 2023.

OSV NEWS PHOTO RICH KALONICK, COURTESY CATHOLIC EXTENSION

can create a new cultural dynamic—a "synodal way of being" evident in everything from church councils to Sunday gatherings to the weekly bulletin. It can allow the sound of new voices to echo throughout the Church.

In the end, the Spirit at work still has a lot to do if the Church is to form a single collective body moving into the future. If we believe the Holy Spirit is at work through the laity, then we need to remember it is God's movement in a Church that speaks, hears, yearns, and lives in ways we do not, through all members of its body. Are leaders ready to listen? Are laypeople ready to speak? How should we move the synodal concept from ideal to reality, from simple "listening sessions" to a lived value for clergy and lay alike? These questions raise additional ones, like: How do we train our ears to truly listen? What voices may be missing from the conversation? Who is speaking and who has yet to be heard? But even taking up these questions would inspire a true ecclesial and cultural transformation, showing us that unity is not something to be coerced or commanded, but achieved instead through communication.

If we want to become a synodal Church not simply by ideal but by practice, then we must be willing to learn new ways to "walk together." Walking together requires a willingness to let go of certainty and succumb to the vulnerability of new challenges. Becoming an actively communal Church demands nothing less. It may mean that our common walk starts with a crawl. But in the end, it may allow us to run toward the Church we truly hope to one day be.

KAYLA AUGUST *is a* Commonweal *Synod Writing Fellow and a student at the School of Theology and Ministry at Boston College, where she is pursuing a PhD in theology and education with a focus on preaching, particularly preaching from the lay perspective.*

If the Church is truly a sign of God at work in the world, then it needs to model listening to those in society and in the ecclesial body whose voices have gone unheard.

KYIV

Howard Altmann

I don't believe in poetry
the poet said to the plant
trying to be a tree
in the rubble of the city.

I believe in your assembly
the poet said to the sticks of wood
holding up the fragile seedling
like an art piece.

Your form is the future
the poet offered the construction
unaware what that was
saying about it all.

Then the testing of the midnight breeze
and the leaves passed
all that they could
to the poet.

Leaning is a kind of stand
the plant revealed
over and over to the poet
buried in the sidewalk exchange.

A fire hydrant is a kind of fire hydrant
the plant broke down to the poet
trying to be a poem
in the rubble of the city.

HOWARD ALTMANN'*s most recent book,* Forgive Time, *is an original collection of fifty poems translated into Hebrew by award-winning poet/translator Tal Nitzán (Keshev Press, 2021).*

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