A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

Commonweal

JANUARY 9, 2015

LIFE & DEATH ON THE TEXAS BORDER

ANANDA ROSE

How Updike Made It Look Easy
Rand Richards Cooper

The Editors on the Torture Report

A Poem by Mary Karr

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HOLY LAND PRINCIPLES

A vacuum crying out to be filled

A Role Waiting For You

The Mac Bride Principles has been the most important campaign ever against anti-Catholic discrimination in Northern Ireland. The Holy Land Principles—also launched by Fr. Sean Mc Manus—can do for Palestinian Muslims and Palestinian Christians what the Mac Bride Principles did for Catholics in Northern Ireland.

England—NOT GOD—sowed the seeds of partition in both lands: the Balfour Declaration for Palestine (1917) and the Government of Ireland Act (1920).

Until Fr. Sean Mc Manus—President of the Capitol Hill-based Irish National Caucus—launched the Mac Bride Principles on November 5, 1984, the American companies doing business in Northern Ireland were never confronted with their complicity in anti-Catholic discrimination. Incredibly, that obvious domestic and foreign policy nexus, with its powerful economic leverage for good, was missed. Same, too, with the American companies (apart from a few with obvious military-security aspects) doing business in Palestine-Israel ... ***A vacuum crying out to be filled***—and filled by the Holy Land Principles, launched on International Human Rights Day, December 10, 2012.

The Holy Land Principles are a corporate code of conduct for the 546 American companies doing business in Israel-Palestine. The 8-point set of Principles does not call for quotas, reverse discrimination, divestment, disinvestment or boycotts—only American fairness in American companies. The Holy Land Principles are pro-Jewish, pro-Palestinian and pro-company. The Holy Land Principles do not take a position on any particular solution—One State, Two State, etc., etc. The Principles do not try to tell the Palestinians or the Israelis what to do—they only call on American companies in the Holy Land to proudly declare and implement their American values by signing the Holy Land Principles.

One hundred sixteen American companies doing business in Northern Ireland have signed the Mac Bride Principles. Can American companies now say: "Catholics in Northern Ireland deserve these principles but Palestinian Muslims and Palestinian Christians do not?" And can fair-minded Americans—companies, consumers, investors and other stakeholders—go along with that?

PLEASE SUPPORT OUR SHAREHOLDER RESOLUTIONS

Shareholder resolutions are proposals submitted by shareholders for a vote at the company's annual meeting. Holy Land Principles has three Resolutions filed for 2015 proxy votes: GE—Annual Meeting, April 22; Corning—Annual Meeting, April 29; and Intel—Annual Meeting, May 21, 2015.

We need your help to get these **Resolutions *passed***.

Please urge investors you may know in these three companies to vote for these three Resolutions filed by Holy Land Principles.

ALSO, please email the Investor Relations Contact (IRC), the person who deals with the issue for the companies: **GE (gary.sheffer@ge.com)**; **Corning (nicholsoas@corning.com)**; and **Intel (linda.l.qian@intel.com)** urging the company to sign Holy Land Principles. Just address them as "Dear IRC."

WHAT MORE YOU CAN DO

Go to HolyLandPrinciples.org—to "Contact Companies," to the list of companies. See email address list of the Investor Relations (ICRs)—the individuals who deal with the issue for the Companies. Please follow directions and email all the IRCs urging their Company to sign the Holy Land Principles.

CAMPAIGN TO DATE

1. Holy Land Principles campaign was launched by mailing Fr. Mc Manus' Memoirs, *My American Struggle for Justice in Northern Ireland ... And The Holy Land* to all the 550 CEOs and 550 IRCs, to all Members of Congress, House and Senate, and to thousands of media.
2. Monthly mailings and emails to all the CEOs and IRCs.
3. Our Pamphlet publications to date are: *Why Cisco Should Sign The Holy Land Principles*, *Why Intel Should Sign Holy Land Principles*, *Why GE Should Sign the Holy Land Principles*, and *Why Corning Should Sign Holy Land Principles*.

   These pamphlets contain a Special Report, we commissioned, by the Sustainable Investments Institute (Si2): "The first reports of this kind published by Si2 or any other organization." WE TOLD YOU THERE WAS A VACUUM CRYING OUT TO BE FILLED.
4. Shareholder Resolutions: Filed with Intel, GE, and Corning. With many more to come, like Coca Cola, FedEx, General Motors, Cisco, and so forth.

Holy Land Principles, Inc. • Capitol Hill • P.O. Box 15128, Washington, D.C. 20003-0849
Tel: (202) 488-0107 • Fax: (202) 488-7537
Email: Sean@HolyLandPrinciples.org • Barbara@HolyLandPrinciples.org • Website: www.HolyLandPrinciples.org

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Paul Baumann

Associate Editors
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Subscription Information
855-713-1792
subscriptions@commonwealmagazine.org

Advertising Manager
Regan Pickett
commonwealads@gmail.com
540-349-5736

Publisher
Thomas Baker

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LETTERS

Dealing with disability

A HARD CASE

I have been a reader of *Commonweal* for over fifty years and this was the first time that an article angered and upset me. I refer to "Don't Beatify Us" by Jo McGowan in the December 5, 2014, issue. The theme of the column is that families with disabled children need help from the community, which is true. At the center of the piece is Nancy Fitzmaurice, a British girl born with severe disabilities, who was raised for twelve years with much love by her family. Complications from an operation left her with severe and constant pain that her mother described as "horrific, agonizing, and fearful." She was admitted to a London hospital noted for pediatric palliative care, but they were unable to relieve her pain. Nancy's parents and doctors chose the only moral and loving option: to end her life of suffering. Because withholding food, which is legal under British law, would leave Nancy in agony for four more months, her mother received court permission to withhold water, allowing Nancy to die in two weeks. What angered me about McGowan's column was her comment: "The fact remains that this is a story about a child killed by her own parents and doctors." What an insensitive remark!

I am surprised and saddened that the editors would print such a remark. How do you think the parents, who did what was loving and moral for their daughter, would feel when publically accused of killing their daughter?

JOHN FRAZIER
Fukushima City, Japan

THE AUTHOR REPLIES

As the mother of a young woman with a severe disability, I appreciate John Frazier's concern for Nancy's parents. The last thing I want is to add to their anguish.

I disagree, however, that ending Nancy's life was "the only moral and loving option" they had. The point of my piece was that sympathy for parents (not only Nancy's) clouds our judgment. Unfortunately, no amount of linguistic sensitivity can disguise either what happened to their child or the role they played in it.

Disability and intractable pain bring us into the most complex moral geography anyone can imagine; when it involves a child who cannot make decisions for herself, the complexity only deepens.

There are many ways to think and talk about these things. Avoiding the reality of what is truly at stake should not be one of them. We need to be honest with ourselves and fully aware of the dangerous territory we are moving into with decisions like the one to starve Nancy Fitzmaurice to death.

JO McGOWAN

CORRECTION

In your November 14, 2014, issue ("Browsers Welcome"), Albert Wu mentioned St. Mark's Bookshop in Manhattan, where I work, in his article about independent brick and mortar bookshops, and discussed how crowdfunding aided our move this past summer. Thank you for the mention, but a minor correction: Wu says we moved to Third Avenue. In fact, we moved *from* Third Avenue *to* Third Street (and Avenue A).

JANET BRUESSELBACH
New York, N.Y.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Gilbert Meilaender on sexless baby-making
Paul Lauritzen on drone warfare
William Pritchard on Ian McEwan
Nicholas Clifford on Tiananmen Square
Celia Wren on *Grantchester*

From the Editors

Shameless

The Senate Intelligence Committee's recent report on the CIA's discontinued interrogation-and-detention program confirmed what many Americans have long suspected: that public officials at the CIA and in the George W. Bush administration have not been altogether truthful in their accounts of what that program entailed, how many detainees it included, and how useful it was in obtaining actionable intelligence in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks. The full six-thousand-page report remains unavailable to the public, but a five-hundred-page executive summary, released on December 9 by Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), provides damning evidence that the CIA provided inaccurate information about its "enhanced-interrogation techniques" to those charged with oversight of the agency.

For years the CIA's leadership has claimed that it held only ninety-eight prisoners, but, according to the new report, the CIA's own records show that 119 men were detained. The report also claims that at least twenty-six of them were "wrongfully held." Among the innocent detainees was an "intellectually challenged" man held "solely as leverage to get a family member to provide information," along with two men believed to be connected to Al Qaeda only because of "information fabricated by a CIA detainee subjected to the CIA's enhanced-interrogation techniques." In fact, the committee found that much of the information produced by abusive interrogation methods was false and that the rest of it was obtainable by other means. The report concludes that, contrary to the claims of several former White House and CIA officials, enhanced interrogation did not lead to the killing of Osama bin Laden or to the capture of other Al Qaeda leaders. Many of the CIA's defenders, including the Intelligence Committee's Republican members, vigorously object to this conclusion, but so far they have failed to refute it.

As for the enhanced-interrogation techniques themselves, the report informs us that they included not only waterboarding—for which the United States prosecuted Japanese soldiers after World War II—but also depriving prisoners of sleep for as long as a week; locking them up in coffin-size "confinement boxes"; keeping them shackled in stress positions for days at a time; threatening to kill their families; holding naked prisoners in cold cells (one innocent detainee died of hypothermia); rectal hydration and feeding, in which CIA officers would pump fluids and mashed-up food into a prisoner's rectum through a tube; and "rough takedowns," in which CIA officers "would scream at a detainee, drag him outside of his cell, cut his clothes off, and secure him with Mylar tape" before beating him as he was dragged up and down a long corridor.

Most people would call this torture. Not former Vice President Dick Cheney, who took to the airwaves to declare the Senate report a "crock" and insisted that the CIA's methods didn't amount to torture because they had been "blessed" by the Bush administration's Department of Justice. Cheney says he believes that rectal hydration was done for "medical reasons" (which is false) but also insists that, because this particular technique never received the DOJ's blessing, "it wasn't torture in terms of it wasn't part of the program." For Cheney, it would seem, anything declared legal by Justice Department lawyers doesn't count as torture, while anything *not* declared legal just doesn't count. This brazen illogic has won Cheney another round of applause on the Fox News right, which has largely dismissed the Senate report as a partisan stunt.

Worse than Cheney's logic, though, are his cynicism and shamelessness. Asked on *Meet the Press* whether it bothered him that 25 percent of the detainees turned out to be innocent, Cheney responded, "I have no problem as long as we achieve our objective.... I'd do it all again in a minute." Cheney is a man of no regrets and very few scruples. He believes that the end justifies the means. This is, not incidentally, one belief that defenders of torture share with defenders of terrorism.

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, many Americans of both parties, moved by either fear or a desire for revenge, were willing to let their government do whatever it took to destroy Al Qaeda. That understandable instinct grew less excusable by the year, as did any confidence in the officials who authorized torture. Among these, Dick Cheney, who also helped scare Americans into believing that Saddam Hussein would give Al Qaeda weapons of mass destruction, has proven to be particularly untrustworthy. In a perfect world, those who authorized such things as waterboarding and confinement boxes would be prosecuted in accordance with the UN Convention against Torture, signed by Ronald Reagan in 1988. In this imperfect world—where it's not uncommon for the powerful to get away with evil, and where the strict demands of justice are sometimes at odds with political prudence—those who authorized torture should at the very least be shunned or ignored as they try to defend their shameful record. They no longer deserve a respectful hearing. ■

December 16, 2014

COMMONWEAL & THE *NEW REPUBLIC*

Paul Baumann

The big news in the world of opinion journalism—where *Commonweal* swims unobtrusively alongside much bigger fish (or sharks)—is last week's mass resignations at the *New Republic*, long the flagship intellectual journal of American liberalism. First the editor, Franklin Foer, and TNR's longtime literary editor, Leon Wieseltier, resigned. The next day, in a very impressive act of suttee, most of the senior editorial staff and virtually all of the magazine's well-known contributing editors threw themselves on the pyre. I've been a journalist for more than thirty years, and that sort of personal and professional loyalty (*Commonweal* excepted!) is about as common as a typo-free newspaper (or magazine). Or a money-making journal of opinion.

Foer obviously was a much beloved and respected boss, and Wieseltier, who had edited the back of the book for more than thirty years, was an intimidating figure, a notorious champion of both critical seriousness and critical severity when it came to book reviewing and literary journalism. He is also a terrific writer and a fierce polemicist in his own right. I, for one, have always felt compelled to read just about anything he writes, especially if I'm inclined to disagree with him. In recent years he has written scathingly about the shallow and trivial nature of much of the "journalism" found online, and about the dangers the relentless demand for "content" presents to reasoned political debate, literary standards, and our public culture. Amen, I say.

So it is not much of a surprise to learn that the implosion of the *New Republic* was caused by a fundamental disagreement over the digital direction in which the magazine's new owner, multi-millionaire Chris Hughes, was taking the venerable magazine. A little surprising is that the upheaval occurred just a few weeks after *TNR* celebrated its hundredth birthday with a big gala in Washington, D.C. The principal speaker was Bill Clinton. (He's no George Mitchell, but still a pretty big deal.) News reports suggest that the antagonism between ownership and editorial staff was barely concealed during the dinner. Ouch. How awkward to announce a divorce right after an anniversary party.

The thirty-one-year-old Hughes, who made his fortune as a college roommate of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, bought the magazine in 2012, and has spent millions upgrading its digital presence and reorienting and redesigning the print magazine. One of his first steps was to do away with editorials, which should have sent a clear signal about the value the new owner placed on the historical weight of the *New Republic*'s "voice." More recently, it was announced that the magazine would cut the number of issues from twenty to ten a year, and that TNR was no longer a magazine, but a "vertically integrated digital media company." At the same time, Hughes hired a more web-savvy replacement for Foer. He did not tell Foer he was being ousted. Whatever an integrated digital media company is, it does not appear to be very good at actual communication.

Right now, the *New Republic* is an integrated digital media company without much of a staff. Even in the digital age, one needs a staff to put out a "product," and the issue scheduled to hit newstands December 15 has been canceled. Not many people in political or cultural journalism are wishing it good luck and Godspeed. In repositioning a magazine like the *New Republic* in the cannibalistic digital world, it is crucial to hold onto its traditional audience as you broaden the magazine's reach. After last week, it is safe to say that the magazine's loyal readers are running for the exits while the identity of its prospective "pageviewers" remains unidentified. As former *TNR* staffer and current *New York* magazine blogger Jonathan Chait has written, if Hughes wanted a vertically integrated digital media company, he should have started one instead of purchasing, and then gutting, a storied institution like the *New Republic*.

Everyone knows that the future of print magazines, let alone small circulation journals like the *New Republic* and *Commonweal*, is precarious. *Commonweal* was, in fact, established as a Catholic answer to the more secular influence of the *New Republic* and the *Nation*. "Little" magazines have always depended on the financial kindness of friends, and sometimes even strangers. The situation is even dicier today. Internet readers simply do not identify with particular magazines the way older readers used to. Those raised on the internet tend to jump from website to website, with little regard for who is paying for the so-called content. Actually taking out a subscription to a magazine is becoming something of an antiquarian hobby. Increasingly, magazines that strive to offer journalism that is well-written (and well edited) and carefully argued must generate revenue in other ways. *Commonweal* has had some success in that regard, but we must do more.

Money, however, is not the only, or even the principal, problem. The *New Republic* has all the money in the world and still can't figure out how it should make its way from the past to the future. One thing is clear, however. Trying to turn a journal like the *New Republic* into a money-making operation is hubris of a rare technocratic kind. Many valuable, even essential, cultural institutions never make a dime. Never making a dime, in fact, helps to give them their singular character and perspective. That outside perspective is desperately needed in our money-mad age. If such enterprises are to be supported, and cherished, it will have to be for reasons that transcend the marketplace and even the seemingly unappeasable demands of the digital age. ■

This article first appeared on dotCommonweal on December 8, 2014.

Margaret O'Brien Steinfels

Real Politics, Anyone?

TRY CAMPAIGNING ON THE ISSUES

The dismal prospect of the 2016 presidential cycle was perfectly captured in a cartoon of New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, iPhone in hand, taking a selfie with a babe in arms (the *New York Times Magazine*, November 27, 2014). The baby looks about to bawl. So should we all. Let's face it: those few of us (36.2 percent) who voted in November were expressing the triumph of hope over experience. Who expects the winning Republicans to work with the losing Democrats? Who expects the Tea Party to work with the moderate Republicans? The Democrats may want to govern, but first they have to win some elections. In order to win they will have to make some drastic changes.

Here's my advice. Give up on slicing and dicing the electorate with demographic profiles. Get back to politics—actually trying to persuade voters—and campaign on broad, fundamental issues instead of niche appeals.

Identifying and putting together different constituencies is nothing new in politics. That's what balanced tickets were about. But in recent decades it's become a new religion, especially among Democrats and their campaign gurus. Every campaign since McGovern's was going to turn on a new youth vote. Then the gurus became more refined: "Soccer moms" soon to be countered by "NASCAR dads" and put into play alongside "Joe six-pack," "pink collars," "angry white males," "angry black women," "older voters," "younger voters," "college grads," blacks and Hispanics (some angry, some not), post-racials. All these came in geographic flavors: urban, suburban, exurban, New South, New West, bi-coastals. Why not cave dwellers? Political consultants have been eager to conjure up slogans calculated to appeal to a specific slice of the electorate; then the candidates dutifully mouth those slogans and ignore the issues their real constituents actually care about.

Mark Udall

If a strategy based on demographics ever worked, it isn't working today. In his 2014 re-election campaign, Sen. Mark Udall (D-Colo.) focused on abortion rights in order to appeal to young women. It didn't work. Either Colorado women don't care as much about abortion as the political consultants imagine, or they care more about issues Udall hardly mentioned. In Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina races, President Barack Obama urged blacks to get out and vote for the (white) Democratic candidates. Some did, but not enough to swing those contests to the Democrats. Is it possible that the president's appeal had the opposite effect, encouraging white voters to pull the lever for the Republican candidates (also white)?

This demographic strategy is of a piece with identity politics, which claims that ethnicity, race, religion, income, and age dictate what you care about. If there's any truth to that, it's not enough to get out the voters. As E. J. Dionne has pointed out, in 2014 disproportionate numbers of Latinos, the young, the poor, and the less educated stayed home. The white working class voted for Republican congressional candidates, while also voting to raise the minimum wage in states with referendums.

In 2016, jobs and wages, inequality and education, income insecurity and the social safety net are more than ripe for national discussion—issues that concern men and women, whites and blacks, young and old. Democrats might actually try taking credit for their achievements, explaining how the worst economic crisis since the Depression has been beaten back by the Obama administration, how affordable health care has provided over 8 million people with access to doctors and hospitals, how jobs are back but workers need better pay. Sure, it can't be done by white papers without also being done by bumper stickers—but it can be done.

And finally, let the culture-war issues slip into history, or at least be waged in the culture rather than the voting booth. Republicans used abortion and same-sex marriage as wedge issues—and where did it get them? Democrats are using these issues to whip up a demographic vote; they alienate those opposed. Demographics ain't politics; it's a shell game run by clever people. What voters need is real politics, engaging the issues that affect the daily lives of the vast majority. Try it, Democrats. ■

Tom Quigley

The Bells of Balangiga

TIME TO FINALLY END THE PHILIPPINE-AMERICAN WAR

President Barack Obama concluded his brief April 2014 visit to the Philippines with a new and controversial agreement allowing U.S. troops to be stationed there. One outspoken opponent of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) is former Filipino Senator R. A. V. Saguisag, who had been involved in ending the presence of foreign troops in his country in 1991 after four hundred uninterrupted years. In a newspaper interview, Saguisag granted that the agreement, which he believed to be unconstitutional, was now a fait accompli. When asked what the United States could do to mitigate opposition to the EDCA, he suggested they could return the Bells of Balangiga.

The Bells of Balangiga? In 1901, during the war in the Philippines, U.S. troops took as war booty some church bells that had been rung as a signal for Filipino insurgents to rush out of the church and slaughter the troops there. For the past couple of decades, many Filipinos have been urging their return.

The war in the Philippines, when thought about at all, is usually thought of as a mere footnote to the so-called Spanish-American War of 1898. It straddled two centuries—1898 to 1902—and could be seen as the United States' first venture in imperialism. After the February 15, 1898, sinking of the *Maine*—a battleship stationed in Havana harbor to protect U.S. interests during the Cuban war of independence from Spain—bloodlust inspired by the yellow journalism of Hearst and Pulitzer (*Remember the Maine, to Hell with Spain!*) pushed President McKinley to declare war on an already weakened Spanish Empire.

As Teddy Roosevelt charged up San Juan Hill in eastern Cuba, Admiral Dewey's Pacific fleet sailed into Manila Bay on May 1 and put paid to the vaunted Spanish fleet. The war with Spain ended with the Treaty of Paris on December 10, 1898, and what Secretary of State John Hay was to call a "splendid little war" seemed to be over. But what followed the Paris peace treaty was the Philippine-American war, with U.S. troops now fighting against the Filipino insurrectionists who naively believed the Americans had come to help them secure their independence. Three years of largely guerrilla warfare ensued between the self-proclaimed Philippine Republic and the American liberators, now seen as invaders. It took the lives of 4,200 U.S. troops and some 20,000 Filipino combatants.

One of the worst atrocities of the war was the second Massacre of Balangiga—that is, the U.S. destruction of the town of Balangiga in the central island of Samar. This was in reprisal for the first massacre, a carefully planned

The smallest of the three Balangiga church bells, on display at a U.S. army base in South Korea

US ARMY.MIL

Filipino attack against U.S. troops on September 28, 1901. Thirty-four rebels, disguised as women, had brought small coffins into the parish church, claiming that a cholera epidemic had killed many of the local children. The sentry on duty was suspicious but did indeed find what he took to be a child in the coffin he inspected, and so the rest were allowed to enter.

On a given signal—the ringing of the church bells—the rebels took their bolos out of the coffins and burst into the plaza where the American troops were eating breakfast. Some forty U.S. troops were killed, as were at least twenty-eight of the insurgents. It was a shocking defeat—the Army's worst since the Battle of Little Big Horn.

The U.S. commander in the Philippines, Brigadier General Jacob H. Smith, intent on revenge, was reported to have said, "I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn…. The interior of Samar must be made a howling wilderness." Thus, the second Balangiga massacre: the thatched huts of the town were set ablaze and many—some say hundreds—of villagers were hunted down and killed. Smith was reported to have ordered the killing of every male over ten years of age, for which he was later court-martialed, reprimanded but not formally punished, and forced into retirement.

When the American troops finally left, they took with them three church bells as war booty. Two of them are now enshrined as trophies at F. E. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming, while the third is kept with the U.S. Ninth Infantry Regiment, currently in South Korea.

There have been efforts over the years to bring the bells home to Balangiga. On the fiftieth anniversary of the 1944 U.S. landing on Leyte, letters to the editor in the Philippine press urged the return of the bells. That same year, in his visit to the Islands, President Bill Clinton pledged to give them back. In 1998, when the country marked a century of independence from Spain, the Philippine government again pressed the issue, and the town of Balangiga built a belfry on the reconstructed church in anticipation of the bells' return.

At that point, Catholic leaders in both countries took up the issue. In 1999, the U.S. bishops conference expressed support for an effort in Congress to secure the return. In 2003, Bishop Leonardo Medroso of Borongan, Balangiga's diocese, wrote to President George W. Bush, as did the archbishop of Cotabato, Orlando Quevedo, OMI (recently made a cardinal by Pope Francis). Both insisted that the bells were church property and thus inappropriate as war booty. Two years later the Philippine embassy in Washington commended the efforts of the Borongan diocese's Global Petition Campaign, which was addressed to the Helsinki Commission, the U.S. Congress and, again, President Bush. All to no effect.

Then, on November 8, 2013, the deadliest typhoon in Philippine history ravaged much of the country and especially the islands of Samar and Leyte. The city of Tacloban, epicenter of the damage, is a short distance from Balangiga. Both cities were devastated by Typhoon Haiyan. Two weeks after the cyclone hit, the headline in the Balangiga paper read: "Please, can we have our bells back?"

Filipinos recall with gratitude the role American troops played in freeing their country from the Japanese invaders seventy years ago and are deeply grateful for the rapid response of U.S. troops in after Typhoon Haiyan. But those who know their history, and certainly those in the devastated islands of Leyte and Samar, know of the dark period in U.S.-Philippine relations at the beginning of the twentieth century. The Balangiga massacre and the theft of the church bells are not forgotten.

Pope Francis will be visiting the Philippines this month and will go to the areas most affected by the typhoon. His expression of concern for the devastation suffered by the people of Samar and Leyte could provide the United States an ideal opportunity to return the church bells to Balangiga, symbolically closing an unfortunate chapter in the relationship. Those people have suffered enough. It is time to send back the bells. ■

Tom Quigley *is former policy adviser on Asian, Latin American, and Caribbean issues to the U.S. Catholic bishops.*

Seeking Refuge

Life & Death at the Border

Ananda Rose

I have only just arrived at La Posada Providencia, an emergency shelter for homeless migrants and asylum seekers in San Benito, Texas, when Sr. Zita Telkamp receives a call from a Homeland Security center in the neighboring town of Harlingen. "They've got another mother and child for us," says Sr. Zita. A few minutes later she is barreling down Highway 77 through sheets of rain in the shelter's communal minivan. You would never know by her lead foot that she is in her eighties—she has been a Sister of Divine Providence for sixty-five years, six of those as program director of La Posada.

La Posada has become a trusted resource for Harlingen's Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility, which is overflowing with undocumented migrants, many of them women and children. The number of Central American mothers and children coming through south Texas has been steadily increasing since 2011, but last summer it skyrocketed. Some compare the situation to the European refugee crisis following World War II. United States Customs and Border Protection reports that about seventy thousand unaccompanied minors were apprehended in 2014. An array of religious leaders, including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, has been calling on Washington to respond to this ongoing humanitarian crisis. Meanwhile, the crisis continues.

Since it opened its doors nearly twenty-five years ago, La Posada has received men, women, and children from over seventy nations. On the day of my visit, there were clients from Honduras, El Salvador, Cuba, Sudan, and Eritrea, but come another day and you could meet someone from Nepal, Sri Lanka, Romania, Rwanda, Yemen, Afghanistan, China, or Peru. Last year, La Posada served clients from twenty-five nations. The people who have passed through its doors are survivors of human atrocities of nearly every kind—religious and political persecution, ethnic cleansing, human trafficking and slavery, extortion, kidnapping, mass murders, terrorism, forced conscription, rape, and other gender-based violence. They come because home is no longer safe.

That's why the United Nations has urged the U.S. government to designate many of these women and children as refugees rather than migrants—especially those coming from Central America. Rather than being sent home, the UN argues, these people should receive international protection. The internationally agreed-upon definition of a refugee is someone who has fled her country based on a well-founded fear of persecution, and who does not feel that her own government can protect her. Refugees, according to the traditional understanding, are persecuted for their race, religion, or political affiliation. When we hear the word "refugee," we may associate it with places like Syria, Iraq, or Sudan. Countries like Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala are not in the throes of civil war, yet the hundreds of thousands who have traveled to the United States from Central America in recent years are fleeing civil strife.

In a March 2014 report by the UN High Commissioner of Refugees titled "Children on the Run," the agency concluded that more than half of the four hundred migrant children interviewed for the report qualified for international protection based on their stories of extortion, rape, murder, gang conscription, and other chilling human rights abuses. These grim realities have prompted human-rights organizations to pressure receiving nations to recognize these emerging forms of displacement. They urge countries like the United States to respond to each asylum-seeker on a case-by-case basis, knowing that deporting all these people means sending some of them back to a place where they face the threat of death—or worse.

At La Posada, the numbers tell the story of this crisis: For the five years preceding fiscal year 2013, La Posada served an average of 210 migrants and asylum-seekers a year, while in fiscal year 2013 La Posada served 589. By fiscal year 2014, those numbers more than doubled: they received 1,411 clients, including 631 children under the age of 18, and 555 women.

The women's dormitory consists of just one bedroom shared by all the female clients and their children. Six twin beds fill the room end to end and are usually shared by several children at a time. To one side is a tiny bathroom

Ananda Rose *holds a doctorate from Harvard University and is the author of* Showdown in the Sonoran Desert: Religious Law and the Immigration Controversy *(Oxford University Press).*

that has been completely demolished. Because La Posada doesn't have the resources to pay professionals to rebuild the bathroom, Sr. Zita has been taking trips to Home Depot for materials and having some of La Posada's male clients do the work. That sort of creative problem-solving is how La Posada keeps running despite the many setbacks. "Somehow God always provides for us," she says.

Tucked away at the end of a tranquil road, La Posada is surrounded by verdant corn fields and a meandering *resaca*—a marshy stream—used to irrigate the papaya trees and vegetable garden tended by guests. La Posada was originally located in Harlingen, where the organization sometimes faced opposition from locals with anti-immigrant views. They blame increased crime on the high level of immigration, or are simply uncomfortable with certain aspects of the asylum process. Sr. Zita says La Posada gets less grief out in the middle of nowhere.

Tucson Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas blesses people through the border fence in Nogales, Arizona.

When Sr. Zita and I arrive at the Homeland Security center in Harlingen, there are two mothers standing outside in the rain, each with a young son. They are from El Salvador. "Who am I taking?" Sr. Zita asks both mothers, but neither speaks English—and Sr. Zita doesn't speak Spanish. An ICE agent explains that one of the mothers has received a money transfer from relatives in San Antonio and is waiting for a taxi to take her and her child to the bus terminal. The other mother is headed with her son to Chicago, but they have no money, which is why Homeland Security called Sr. Zita.

Because of the sheer numbers of mothers and children inundating Homeland Security facilities like the one in Harlingen, ICE has been releasing them with papers to reappear in court for immigration hearings at a later date. Many never show up. Some of them have no money and nothing but the clothes on their backs. That's where La Posada comes in. The only nonprofit shelter of its kind in the Rio Grande Valley, the organization provides short-term and long-term shelter for its clients, as well as ESL and life-skills training, and legal and medical services. It also provides three meals a day, including a home-cooked dinner attended by all clients.

"I just want to go to Chicago now," one of the mothers says through tears. Her fifteen-year-old son made the journey first; he is waiting for her in Chicago. Her younger son, who is nine, is silent and bleary-eyed. Over the course of eight days, they traveled from La Paz, El Salvador, through Mexico, and crossed the border near McAllen, where Border Patrol found them. La Paz means "peace," but, as this mother tells me, "No hay paz en La Paz." She says she has known countless people who have left La Paz for the United States, despite the perilous journey through Mexico, where criminals prey on vulnerable migrants, many of whom are extorted, murdered, kidnapped, trafficked, and sexually assaulted. Thousands more die in the scorching wilderness of the borderlands. But this mother, like so many others, was willing to take the risk because the situation at home is so dire. El Salvador has one of the highest murder rates in the world, largely the result of gang violence and drug trafficking.

When we return to La Posada, Sr. Zita ushers mother and child into the main house where the woman calls her contact in Chicago. The contact will wire money to Sr. Zita, and when it arrives she will drive them to the bus depot in Harlingen. In the meantime, they will both get showers, clean clothes, a warm meal, and a safe place to sleep.

Also at La Posada are two young mothers—one from Eritrea, the other from Sudan—who arrived in the spring after fleeing civil unrest in their home countries. The Sudanese woman arrived with her three-year-old daughter and her six-month-old son. The Eritrean woman came to La Posada with her two-year-old daughter—and four months pregnant. She traveled with her husband, but, while Homeland Security released the mother and child to La Posada, the husband was placed in a detention center. He was later transferred to a different facility in Georgia, although his wife was not contacted about his move and did not know for several weeks where he was being held.

The women paid $8,000 each to make the journey. They began in Brazil, which they entered with forged documents, then traveled by taxi, bus, car, and foot through the jungles, mountains, and deserts of Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico. In each country, one guide handed them off to

CNS PHOTO / NANCY WIECHEC

another. Neither has any family in the United States. They know very little English. Rather than trying to enter the United States illegally, they went straight to U.S. border officials and declared themselves asylum-seekers—as their guides advised them to do.

How should the United States respond to the crisis? Is it our moral duty to give shelter and asylum to these mothers and children? "These unaccompanied minors should be cared for in their home countries, rather than burdening our already unsustainable entitlement systems," Texas Governor Rick Perry wrote to Obama in May 2012. Perry, along with many other Republicans, blames the federal government's border policies—the lack of effective border security as well as the administration's supposedly lax deportation policy—for the surge in migrant children. Apparently he is not aware that Obama has deported more migrants than any other president.

Meanwhile, in states as far north as Massachusetts, officials scrambled to open shelters for these children. In an emotional speech in July, Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick announced plans to open a facility to house a thousand migrant children. Flanked by Cardinal Seán O'Malley of Boston, Patrick said that decision was based on "love of country and lessons of faith." He reminded the public of how the United States turned away a boat of Jewish children in 1939, an act that "remains a blight on our national reputation." Through tears, Patrick spoke of his most personal reason for defending these children who have come here alone: his faith. "Every major faith tradition on the planet charges its followers to treat others as we ourselves wish to be treated. I don't know what good there is in faith if we can't and won't turn to it in times of need," Patrick said.

Another woman religious, Sr. Pamela Marie Buganski, SND, responded to the crisis by moving from Toledo to Brooks County, Texas—ground zero of migrant deaths in the state—to help Eddie Canales, founder and director of the South Texas Human Rights Center. Sr. Pam has been assisting Canales in his effort to end migrant suffering along the Texas-Mexico border. "How do you get out in front of a disaster like this?" she asks. She has been responding to a seemingly endless series of calls from the relatives of migrants who have gone missing in Texas.

La Posada volunteer coordinator Sr. Margaret Mertens works with two guests on the shelter's vegetable garden.

COURTESY LA POSADA

One unexpected way Sr. Pam found herself helping was by providing pastoral care for the forensic teams who have been working to exhume the remains of border crossers who have died in the vast brushland of Brooks County, which is not equipped to deal with the escalating numbers of dead migrants. As a result, most of them have been buried in common graves without proper forensic analysis. For the past few summers, volunteer forensic teams have spent weeks exhuming the bodies of migrants in the hope of identifying the dead and repatriating them so that their loved ones can bury them properly. This summer the team recovered more than fifty sets of remains: Bones buried in shopping bags; skulls in biohazard bags; clothed skeletons thrown into the ground. Krista Latham, a forensic anthropologist from the University of Indiana, headed up this year's effort. "These are human beings who are refugees of extreme poverty and institutionalized violence," says Latham. "These are human beings who died trying to get to a place they thought would bring freedom and safety. Human beings who were invisible in life and who were being forgotten in death. Human beings who have family members wondering what happened to them."

In our last conversation, Sr. Pam called me from McAllen, Texas, where she was volunteering with Catholic Charities for the day. She was in charge of a mother and daughter who had not bathed in a week. "Sometimes all you can do in the face of such a disaster is be present," she said. She had spent the day helping other mothers and children that had been released from detention. "I'm not a doctor," Sr. Pam told me. "I can't fix bodies. I'm not a lawyer. I can't represent these mothers and children in court. But I can simply be with them."

This past summer, La Posada welcomed its eight thousandth client, a man from East Africa who had been assaulted by terrorist groups there. "What a privilege it has been for the Sisters of Divine Providence, staff, volunteers, and donors to have touched so many lives, making God's Providence more visible in the world and giving hope to thousands," says Sr. Zita. "It's a wonderful feeling that I have to make them feel welcome and loved not only by God, but by us." One of Sr. Zita's colleague's echoed that sentiment: "The whole point of much of the Lord's teaching is having that sense of, 'When I was hungry you gave me to eat, when I was a stranger you welcomed me.' That is what La Posada is all about." ■

The Charms of the Conqueror

How John Updike Made It Look Easy

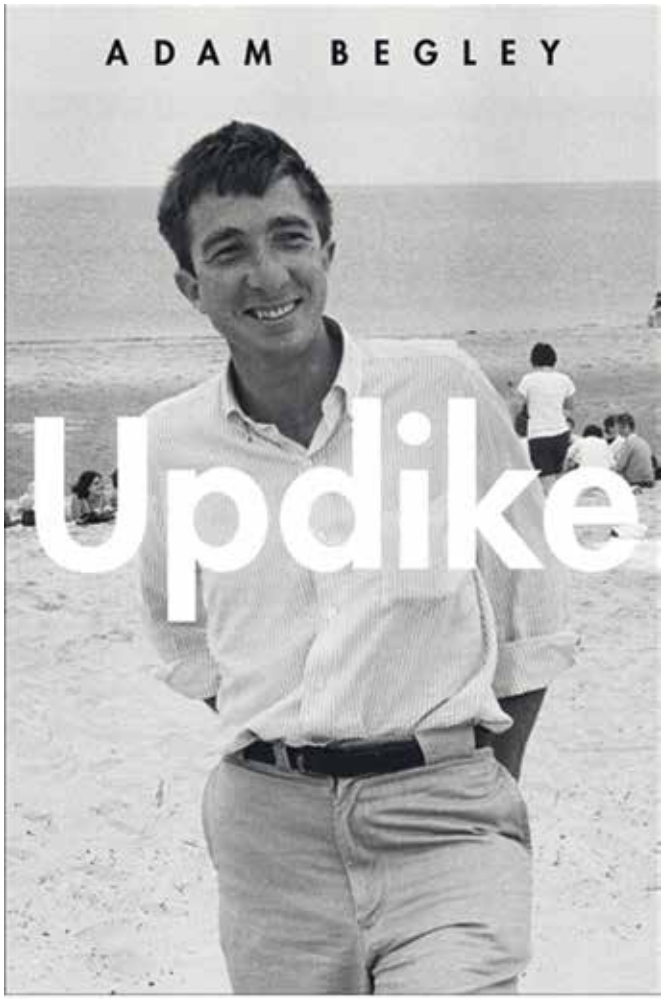
Rand Richards Cooper

Imagine a writer who would be the perfect antithesis to today's literary culture, where confessional narratives of family dysfunction and personal struggle, conveyed in prose styles edgy, blunt or angry, reiterate the eternal theme of the Tormented Artist. Our Un-Tormented Artist would be an Ivy League–educated WASP, groomed for success by his family. His precocious career would have proceeded from triumph to triumph; his prose would combine effortless eloquence with an easy comfort in its own leisurely peregrinations. Abjuring urban literary enclaves, he would spend his life in the suburbs, hanging out with lawyers and accountants and golfing three times a week. His wife would sacrifice her own career aspirations to support his. Our writer would rack up every literary prize short of the Nobel, while assiduously presenting a face of genteel modesty graced with wry self-deprecation. He would be a churchgoing Christian. Serenity, rather than struggle, would be his hallmark; praise, rather than pungency, his métier. He would never suffer a single hour of writer's block.

He would be, in other words, John Updike.

Is it difficult to see why some resented him so heartily? From the start Updike's detractors derided him for empty aestheticism and, worse, a privileged complacency. Alfred Kazin called him "wholly literary...the quickest of quick children." To Alfred Chester he was "profoundly untroubled." Garry Wills criticized his "reactionary dandyism," blasting his novels as "profligate with pretty writing." Updike's fictional portrayals of women, critics asserted, amounted to a kind of soft misogyny, the obnoxious ramblings of a man obsessed with sex and given to writing about it with frivolous poeticality—"a penis with a thesaurus," jousted David Foster Wallace. Updike's inveterate use of his own life for fiction, combined with his habit of writing luxurious sentences that conveyed the feeling of having been cherished by their creator, left him vulnerable to charges of self-love while saddling him with the paradox of being a writer routinely condemned for writing well.

Rand Richards Cooper, *longtime film critic for* Commonweal*, is the author of two works of fiction,* The Last to Go *and* Big as Life.



DENNIS STOCK / MAGNUM PHOTOS / HARPERCOLLINS PUBLISHERS

Defending Updike against such criticisms is a chief goal of Adam Begley's excellent biography, *Updike* (Harper, $29.99, 576 pp.). Begley's father, novelist Louis Begley, was a Harvard classmate of Updike's, and in his preface Begley *fils* (former books editor of the *New York Observer*) confesses that one of his "fondest wishes" is to champion Updike, who died six years ago at age seventy-six, and help prod "a surge in his posthumous reputation." But his larger challenge is to tell a life spent mostly in the library and

study, and moreover one that Updike himself wrote about relentlessly. This relentlessness complicates Begley's task. How can a biographer work a field already so thoroughly plowed by the subject himself?

Updike proceeds chronologically, beginning with the author's 1940s small-town childhood in Shillington, Pennsylvania. The novelist prized his childhood, mining his family experiences to create such early works as *The Centaur* and *Pigeon Feathers*. In the characters and byways of Shillington he saw an idyllic world that his ambitions took him away from forever—thus rendering that world available for recapture in fiction, a paradise lost and regained. "*Perhaps / we meet our heaven at the start and not / at the end of life*," he would write poignantly, in one of his last poems, as he was dying.

Begley chronicles Updike's Harvard years, where he worked at the famed literary magazine, the *Lampoon*, and in the process provides an illuminating look at elite cultural networks in the 1950s. As an undergrad Updike gets a letter from the chairman of Harper & Brothers, the publishing house, urging him to submit a novel. He gets a letter from William Maxwell, famed fiction editor of the *New Yorker*, inviting him—still an undergraduate—to come to New York and "discuss over lunch his future as a *New Yorker* writer." Such remarkable overtures seemed to strike Updike as his birthright, and his complaint, years later, that "people assume I fell into the *New Yorker* right from Harvard's lap, but I had been trying for eight years" only highlights the astonishing fact that he'd begun submitting work—to the *New Yorker*—as a thirteen-year-old.

After Harvard, following a yearlong detour to art school in England, came his stint as staff writer at the *New Yorker*, a time he called "the ecstatic breakthrough of my literary life." Updike was a natural "Talk of the Town" writer, his prose, as Begley says, "breezy and sharp and tremendously self-assured." But after two years he moved his growing family—by his mid-twenties he had three children, with another soon to come—to the Yankee redoubt of Ipswich, Massachusetts. There he and his wife Mary joined a group of young married couples whose weekend frolics and rampant infidelities he soon began transforming into fiction, culminating in *Couples* (1968), the novel that made him rich and famous.

To get at his subject's "private, hidden self," Begley explores the gap between the way Updike presented himself—his insistence that he was "a pretty average person," what one friend called "his passive-aggressive aw-shucks pose"—and the titanic ambition behind the façade. From the start he was a monster of productivity, contributing nearly three hundred poems, stories, movie reviews, essays, and drawings to his high-school newspaper, a frantic pace that continued throughout his adult life, unabated into old age.

How did he do it? Updike was freakishly articulate, on the page as in person, and seldom needed to rework his drafts. He was fast. And behind his gentleman-amateur demeanor lay a steely single-mindedness. "A certain ruthlessness was required," Begley writes, "to divest the day of unwarranted distractions." Perhaps most important, he had a doting—and ambitious—mother. Begley quotes Freud's remark that "a man who has been the indisputable favorite of his mother keeps for life the feeling of a conqueror." A would-be writer herself, with a master's degree in literature but mired in a Depression-era life in the boondocks, Linda Grace Hoyer Updike cultivated her only child to seize the success that had eluded her. Feeding him a childhood diet of the *New Yorker* and *Saturday Evening Post*, she engendered in Updike an ambition so specifically focused on literary achievement that when he graduated from high school, he pointed to a bookshelf in the family house and vowed to her that he would one day fill it with his works.

But the real secret of Updike's prodigious output lies in the relation of his life to his writing. Most autobiographically minded fiction writers require a working-through phase, in which life events percolate before they are ready for use—especially painful ones. Updike defied such norms, acting with what Begley accurately calls "dizzying speed" to transform his life into fiction. In July 1974, for instance, he and Mary informed their children of their intention to divorce, and the heartbreaking story Updike composed about this encounter, "Separating," was finished—finished!—a mere two weeks later. It is hardly a joke to say that Updike could divorce on Friday and write about it on Monday.

Everything in his life got used, big or small. Updike's omnibus collections of nonfiction are stuffed with ephemera: three pages on the history of suntans; a page and a half on bad haircuts; three hundred words on the attractions of the letter V...and on and on. This promiscuity elicited a hilarious riff in Martin Amis's 1991 review of *Odd Jobs*, imagining a typical afternoon *chez* Updike: "The telephone starts ringing. A science magazine wants something pithy on the philosophy of subatomic thermodynamics; a fashion magazine wants ten thousand words on his favorite color. No problem—but can they hang on? Mr. Updike has to go upstairs again and blurt out a novel." Less charitable was the envious riposte from David Foster Wallace: "Has the sonofabitch ever had one unpublished thought?"

Such barbs acknowledge the polymath intelligence of a man capable of writing about anything, even as they lampoon a certain immodesty in doing so. What Begley makes clear is that Updike couldn't help himself: he simply couldn't exist without turning his life into narrative, submitting all experiences to what he called, with a hint of exasperation, "my creativity, my relentless need to produce." With Updike, the life truly *was* the fiction, and vice versa. An acute insight into this truth was provided by Updike himself. "Writers' lives break into two halves," he commented in a 1966 *Paris Review* interview. "At the point where you get your writerly vocation you diminish your receptivity to experience. Being able to write becomes a kind of shield, a way of hiding, a

Updike cherished his childhood, his perceptions, his abilities, his sense of destiny, even his looks; and the fact that he used this self-cherishing so productively as a writer complicates our task of assessing him as a person.

way of too instantly transforming pain into honey." That there was a cost to this "hiding" Begley does not attempt to deny. In an interview for a 1982 PBS documentary, Updike's college-age son, David, commented that his father "decided at an early age that his writing had to take precedence over his relations with real people." What father would not feel a chill in the bones, hearing that?

Though Updike protested against autobiographical readings of his fiction, Begley concedes that "the attempt was halfhearted and transparently disingenuous"; and Updike's own behavior indicates that he knew it. Anxious over the ramifications, both personal and legal, of writing about adulterous affairs (the enraged husband of one of his lovers had threatened to sue), Updike periodically asked the *New Yorker* to delay publishing a story until he considered it safe to do so. At one point he had no less than six stories awaiting clearance at the magazine. And a novel detailing a lengthy affair, *Marry Me*, stayed locked in a safe-deposit box in an Ipswich bank for over a decade; written in 1962, but not published until 1976, after Updike had divorced his first wife and no longer cared.

Begley is an enterprising curator of Updikeana, and serves up choice tidbits about our man: that he was rejected by Princeton; that he showed up for his *Lampoon* interview proudly toting a satchel full of his cartoons—framed—drawn for his high-school newspaper; that he fell asleep during a reading at Harvard by T. S. Eliot; that his roommate, with whom he was intensely competitive, was Christopher "Kit" Lasch, the future historian (and *Commonweal* contributor) who wrote *The Culture of Narcissism*; that the office he rented above a restaurant in Ipswich in 1960 cost him $8 per week; that his IQ was 150; that he dressed up as a Puritan for "Seventeenth Century Day" in Ipswich the year *Couples* was published; that in 1982 he and the *New Yorker* were sued for libel, pursuant to his characterization, in a book review of Doris Day's autobiography, of her lawyer as "a swindler" who had embezzled from her.

As for Updike personally, most who met him were struck by his sly, ironic humor, his love of pranks (into adulthood he maintained a fondness for physical pratfalls), his flashy verbal intelligence, and his eagerness to charm. Meeting him in 1959, Philip Roth finds him "lively, funny and mischievous, a kind of engaging elongated leprechaun." Many noted his extraordinary articulateness; novelist Tim O'Brien, an occasional golf partner, remarked that "he spoke very much as he wrote, with grace and precision and irony and impish humor and striking miracles of expression," adding that "I was never unaware that I was strolling down the fairway with John Updike."

Yet while Updike made a good show of congeniality, at a deep level he preferred his own company to that of "real people." The friendships he pursued in Ipswich ended when he divorced and moved on; one senses they were dropped once the Ipswich scene no longer served his writing interests. The truth Begley delivers is that Updike *was* supremely self-involved. He cherished his childhood, his perceptions, his abilities, his sense of destiny, even his looks; and the fact that he used this self-cherishing so productively as a writer complicates our task of assessing him as a person. Was his self-involvement unseemly? Certainly he reveled in himself in ways that can be off-putting, as when he confesses to feeling "exhilarated" at visiting his hometown, "as if my self is being given a bath in its own essence"—or when, in his memoir, he describes himself in Ipswich as "a stag of sorts, in our herd of housewife-does." And his 1963 review of Denis de Rougement's *Love in the Western World* asserts, somewhat incriminatingly, that "only in being loved do we find external corroboration of the supremely high valuation each ego secretly assigns itself."

At times, in defense of Updike, Begley comes off as a tad euphemistic. Commenting on the avidity with which the novelist and his Ipswich circle pursued extramarital affairs, he asserts that "the possibility that serial adultery would gradually undermine most marriages and put the welfare of the progeny at risk seems to have been overlooked." And here is how he assesses Updike's success in navigating, with no interruption of his writing routine, the marital storm that followed his confessing a long-term affair to his first wife: "Once again, his remarkable ability to compartmentalize guaranteed a smoothly functioning professional life." Well, that's one way to put it. Another might be to say that nothing—not even family—would be allowed to get in the way of the Updike juggernaut.

For all the ad hominem beating he took from some critics over the years, Updike subjected himself to withering self-criticism, especially in his stories, via the many alter-egos whose pretensions, abdications, and other failings came in for fictional upbraiding. The closing line of 1956's "Sunday Teasing" administers a harsh corrective to a pompous husband in the form of "a perfect and luminous thought: *you don't know anything*." "Separating" (1978) discloses Richard Maple's anguished admission, upon informing his young son that he is leaving the family, that "my father would have died before doing it to me"—the writing of which, Begley speculates, "must have felt like entering a guilty plea" to Updike. And consider the final paragraph of the 1982 story "Deaths of Distant Friends," whose narrator, spurred to retrospection by the threefold deaths of a friend, a family dog, and an acquaintance, looks back with chagrin to infidelities he committed years ago:

> In truth—how terrible to acknowledge—all three of these deaths make me happy, in a way. Witnesses to my disgrace are being removed. The world is growing lighter. Eventually there will be none to remember me as I was in those embarrassing, disarrayed years when I scuttled without a shell, between houses and wives, a snake between skins, a monster of selfishness, my grotesque needs naked and pink, my social presence beggarly and vulnerable. The deaths of others carry us off bit by bit, until there will be nothing left; and this too will be, in a way, a mercy.

Such finely articulated ironies remind us that what matters in the end is Updike's performance not as husband or father, but as a writer of prose. Among the many commentators Begley lassos to help assess Updike's accomplishment, I found myself zeroing in on novelist Lorrie Moore's assertion, in a 2003 *New York Review of Books* essay, that Updike was "American literature's greatest short-story writer, and arguably our greatest writer without a single great novel." I'd go further and call him our greatest sentence and paragraph writer. His was the genius of "I wish I had said that"—a portable genius, incorrigibly metaphorical, that could touch down anywhere, on any subject, with sentences that surprise and delight. In a note to William Maxwell concerning one of those controversial Ipswich stories, he muses that "though the vessel of circumstantial facts is all invented, libel-proof, the liquid contained may, if spilled soon, scald somebody." Elsewhere, asked to sum up the allure of the *Harvard Lampoon*, he observes that "the *Lampoon* is a club and, as do all clubs, feeds off the delicious immensity of the excluded."

The hundreds of book reviews he wrote outline a reading of breathtaking scope ("monumental erudition" is Begley's apt phrase) and an amount of reviewerly writing to boggle the mind, yet they sparkle everywhere with eloquent aperçus. As a critic, Updike unfailingly gets to the essence of what is sayable about the writer in question. On Muriel Spark: "Detachment is the genius of her fiction. We are lifted above her characters, and though they are reduced in size and cryptically foreshortened, they are seen all at once, and their busy interactions are as plain and pleasing as a solved puzzle." On Céline: "His novels, like Beckett's, are testaments of defiance, gratuitous breakings of silence, a numbed survivor's snarled testimony to catastrophes that are scarcely distinguishable." And, in valediction, this tribute to Nabokov:

> Few minds so scientific have deigned to serve the gods of fancy; with his passion for precision and for the complex design, he mounted for display the crudest, most futile lurchings of the human heart—lust, terror, nostalgia. The violence and violent comedy of his novels strike us, in the main, as merely descriptive, the way the violences of geology are. He saw from a higher altitude, from the top of the continents he had had to put behind him.

As for Updike's fiction, even a mediocre story—and there were many—offers up those miracles of expression Tim O'Brien cited. Describing Updike's fiction, Begley refers to "passages where the writing seems a pure expression of joy, of intense pleasure taken in the act of composition." This pleasure propels Updike's lifelong project, as he described it, of "giving the mundane its beautiful due." Writer, character, and reader join together in this project, experiencing enlargements of perception sufficient to what Updike called "creation's giddy bliss."

In his 1973 story "Daughter, Last Glimpses Of," Updike depicts the day his narrator's daughter turns eighteen and leaves home (typically, Updike wrote it mere weeks after his own daughter, Liz, did likewise). An aura of sadness surrounds the narrator's recognition that, busy with work over the years, he has insufficiently appreciated the loveliness of his family's life. The story ends with the family rooster—a hobby acquisition of his daughter's—crowing in the yard at dawn, triggering a poignant metaphor:

> He never moderates his joy, though I am gradually growing deafer to it. That must be the difference between soulless creatures and human beings: creatures find every dawn as remarkable as the ones previous, whereas the soul grows calluses.

Religious themes in Updike's life and in his writing clustered around three recurring impulses: gratitude and praise for the created world; awe at the mystery of human consciousness; and dread and disbelief at the prospect of personal extinction. These impulses shaped his fiction from the start. His 1961 story "Pigeon Feathers" uses a small drama of violence and exhilaration to explore how our instinctive rejection of death entails faith in a created world, and vice versa. After reading an essay by H. G. Wells debunking Jesus' divinity, the story's fourteen-year-old protagonist, David Kern, experiences a crisis of faith, precipitated into "a jumble of horror" at the thought that the world is mere accident and there is no God, no soul, and no existence after death. Rejecting platitudes offered by his minister at church ("You might think of heaven as the way the goodness Abraham Lincoln did lives after him"), David is driven to fearful despair—a despair Updike alleviates in the story's bravura ending. Asked by his grandmother to kill pigeons in the barn, David shoots six of them with his .22 rifle. Burying the birds, he notes with awed admiration their finely wrought beauty, and finds himself reassured anew; the story ends with him "robed in this certainty: that the God who had lavished such craft on these worthless birds would not destroy His whole creation by refusing to let David live forever."

Raised Lutheran, Updike in adulthood was an intermittent churchgoer whose "peace of mind," Begley tells us, "depended on conventional religious observance, regular doses of theology administered by those authors who helped him believe (especially Barth and Kierkegaard), and a dose of his own, internally generated faith." That peace of mind could be elusive. Throughout his life Updike experienced intimations of an absence at the core of things, and deployed faith as a practical bulwark against it. "Religion enables us to ignore nothingness," he wrote, "and get on with the jobs

THE VOICE OF GOD

Ninety percent of what's wrong with you
could be cured with a hot bath,
says God from the bowels of the subway.
but we want magic, to win
the lottery we never bought a ticket for.
(Tenderly, the monks chant, embrace
the suffering.) The voice of God does not pander,
offers no five year plan, no long-term
solution, nary an edict. It is small & fond & local.
Don't look for your initials in the geese
honking overhead or to see thru the glass even
darkly. It says the most obvious crap—
put down that gun, you need a sandwich.

—Mary Karr

Mary Karr's most recent books of poetry and memoir are Sinners Welcome *and* Lit, *respectively. She is the Peck Professor of Literature at Syracuse University.*

of life." And: "The choice seemed to come down to: believe or be frightened and depressed all the time." Such comments nourish a suspicion that Updike was what Begley calls "a closet nihilist"—and the novelist himself, in a *New York Times* interview, confessed to a recurring "sense of futility and of doom and of darkness...of death being behind everything in life, a sort of black backdrop."

His engagement with these perspectives found its fullest treatment in the quartet of novels, written at ten-year intervals over three decades, chronicling the life and times—and in the end, the death—of Harry Angstrom of Pennsylvania, the ex-high-school-basketball-star known as "Rabbit." The first installment, *Rabbit Run* (1960), portrayed Rabbit as a callow twenty-six-year-old, prone to spiritual epiphanies, who abandons his wife and young son out of an urgent sense that there must be more to existence than his small-town life of dull responsibility. Counseled by a psychologically minded minister who asks him to explain why he considers his personal destiny so important, Rabbit answers, "It's just that, well, it's all there is. Don't you think?" Balancing this solipsism with a capricious reverential instinct, Updike steers Harry through basic theological dilemmas, letting him voice his intuition that the existence of something perfect—a perfect golf swing, in one memorable passage—necessarily implies the existence of a Creator.

Critics derided what they viewed as inconsistencies in Harry, an inarticulate and even boorish man who nevertheless experiences exquisite spiritual stirrings; Garry Wills called "the foisting onto this 'middle American' of Updike's own preciosity" an "egregious flaw." Yet the novel is not merely the depiction of a "middle American," but of a spiritual crisis, and its portrayal of Harry reveals a combination of realistic and religious purposes fundamental to Updike's fiction. In Updike's construal of spiritual gifts, Rabbit's eager susceptibility to bliss, his ability to be made "perfect in joy" by a perfect golf shot or the cidery smell of a field in autumn, fulfills the Barthian challenge—issued in the novel by a second, far sterner minister—to "burn...with the force of belief." Author's and hero's preciosity converge in praise of the created world, with Rabbit's inchoate intuitions of transcendence rendered in Updike's lyrical prose.

This justification discloses a spiritual logic ubiquitous in Updike. His writing flickers with the hope that the world was created, and thus merits the devotion of attention (by fictional characters) and description (by Updike himself). "Imitation is praise," he writes in his memoir *Self-Consciousness*; "description expresses love." This love, in turn, is linked again and again to the fervent hope for immortality. "My mind when I was a boy," he writes,

> sent up its silent screams at the thought of future eons—at the thought of the cosmic party going on without me. The yearning for an afterlife is the opposite of selfish: it is love and praise for the world that we are privileged, in this complex interval of light, to witness and experience.

The *Rabbit* novels are crammed with the trivia of American life down the decades, and their accumulating excess reminds us that far from being "untroubled," Updike wrote from a condition of spiritual urgency. The critic James Wood, praising the *Rabbit* series, adroitly described Updike's "plush attention to detail" as a form of "nostalgia for the present." While Updike could write with incandescent lyricism about the world he had left behind in Pennsylvania, he knew that in a profound sense *all* life is being left behind; every minute of our lives is a leave-taking. "The self," he wrote in *Self-Consciousness*, "is a window on the world we can't bear to think of shutting." The *Rabbit* novels bulge with the efforts of a man desperate to get as much in as he can before the window shuts.

As for Harry Angstrom, by the time Updike was done with him, that youthful capacity for bliss had ebbed; in *Rabbit at Rest* (1991), he faces mortality without benefit of faith. Beset in his fifties by congestive heart failure, Harry persists in helpless thrall to junk food, and the novel's grim glee in toting up the orgy of toxins seems a rebuke to the very idea of a soul. *Rabbit at Rest* deals obdurately in the physical realities of the body. For Harry, realizing that the whole world, himself included, is mere "material" triggers a sense of "stifling uselessness" and snuffs out prayer. He dies without consolation, his death a slow dwindling, rendered over hundreds of pages, that ends suitably following a collapse on a basketball court—betrayed by a heart that

turns out to be not the seat of love or desire, but merely the sputtering engine of a "soft machine."

For Updike himself, the end came with shocking speed. A smoker for the first half of adulthood, he'd been diagnosed with mild emphysema as a young man, and in *Self-Consciousness* recalled worrying that "young as I was, still in my twenties, I had death in my lungs." The words proved prescient. In late September 2008, complaining of "a cold that won't let go," Updike went in for x-rays that revealed stage-four lung cancer. He declined treatment and spent his last three months bedridden at home, receiving a few family visitors—and writing poetry. By turns grim, rueful, and radiantly nostalgic, the poems he wrote during those months—describing symptoms and surges of dread; expressing gratitude to friends of long ago—are hard to read, evoking an almost unbearable poignancy. Updike died on January 27, 2009, having finished his last poem a month earlier, three days before Christmas. Titled "Fine Point," it addressed questions that had preoccupied him all his life:

Why go to Sunday school, though surlily,
and not believe a bit of what was taught?
The desert shepherds in their scratchy robes
undoubtedly existed, and Israel's defeats—
the Temple in its sacredness destroyed
by Babylon and Rome. Yet Jews kept faith
and passed the prayers, the crabbed rites,
from table to table as Christians mocked.

We mocked, but took. The timbrel creed of praise
gives spirit to the daily; blood tinges lips.
The tongue reposes in papyrus pleas,
saying, Surely—magnificent, that "surely"—
goodness and mercy shall follow me all
the days of my life, my life, forever.

Having read Begley's book, I shouldn't be surprised that Updike wrote to the very end; still, I find myself awed by the courage it must have taken to sit in the fearful presence of death and write... a *sonnet*? Moreover one that confidently assays the wordplay of "praise/please" and "surely/surlily" while assessing the syntactical magnificence of Scripture *and* snugly assimilating the psalm into its closing lines? Faith and art join hands, converting suffering into beauty, using poetry to draw a bead on the eternal. "With Updike," writes Begley, "looking, seeing and noting on paper were acts of worship." When all else failed, there remained the writing itself, like faith that renews itself in the act and moment of prayer.

Updike's 1962 story "The Blessed Man of Boston, My Grandmother's Thimble, and Fanning Island" included a kind of writer's prayer: "O Lord, bless these poor paragraphs, that would do in their vile ignorance your work of resurrection." Resurrection encapsulates his mission, pursued from the beginning of his writing life to the very end, to rescue experience from the oblivion of time and of forgetting. Taking its power from time's passage, his prose tilts toward what he once called the message of Proust—namely, that "the transformation of experience by memory into something ineffably precious is the one transcendent meaning each life wrests from death." The mystery of Updike enfolds something uncanny; like Shakespeare, he seemed able to lavish godly care on every sentence. "The distinction between a thing well done and a thing done ill," he said in an interview, "obtains everywhere—in all circles of Paradise and Inferno."

The final story published in Updike's lifetime appeared in the *New Yorker* eight months before his death. A memoir-essay disguised as fiction, "The Full Glass" portrays a near-octogenarian recalling his childhood in small-town Pennsylvania and later years in suburban New England. Spurring these recollections is the glass of water he drinks to wash down his old man's pills, "tasting of bliss" and linking him to the child he was long ago, a boy who "had usually been running from somewhere or other and had a great innocent thirst"—and, less innocently, to his thirsty desire for another man's wife years later. The motif cues up one of those Proustian transformations, evoking the memory of a drinking fountain at a gas station that had the coldest water in town, water that "made your teeth ache, it was so cold." Never again in his life, Updike writes, would he taste water as good as that "which bubbled up in a corner of that small-town garage, the cement floor black with grease and the ceiling obscured by the sliding-door tracks and suspended wood frames holding rubber tires fresh from Akron."

The rubber overhead had a smell that cleared your head the way a bite of licorice did, and the virgin treads had the sharp cut of metal type or newly ironed clothes. That icy water held an ingredient that made me, a boy of nine or ten, eager for the next moment of life, one brimming moment after another.

The close of the story has the old man taking his "life-prolonging pills" and hoisting the glass: "drinking a toast to the visible world," Updike writes, "his impending disappearance from it be damned."

After someone we love dies, his or her voice stays with us, fresh and close, for years; we keep expecting the phone to ring with that voice on the other end; we experience frank disbelief, and renewed sorrow, at the idea that its owner truly is gone forever. It's not much different with a writer one has loved. Keep company with a writer, in many books over decades of your life, and you grow accustomed to his presence; you hear his voice in much the same way you hear a friend's or a sibling's. Updike in his early years imitated other writers' styles, channeling first Fitzgerald and Hemingway, and later Salinger and Nabokov—praising them by imitating their voices before eventually settling in to play his own exquisitely tuned instrument. Reading his prose in this life-and-art-affirming biography, I hear him vivid as ever, and miss him all over again. ■

MICHAEL KEATON & EDWARD NORTON IN *BIRDMAN*, FOX SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES

Richard Alleva

Blockbusted

'BIRDMAN'

We've all seen terrific movies about the theater—*All About Eve, Les Enfants du Paradis, Topsy-Turvy*, among many others. And if you're familiar with the tropes of the genre—booze and drugs in the dressing rooms, the actress whose ambition competes with her desire for home and children, the overweening critic vowing to destroy an actor's career—you won't be surprised by many of the plot ploys of *Birdman, or the Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance*. Yet director Alejandro González Iñárritu has made something that looks and feels unique. By confining most of the action to the interior of one real Broadway theater, the St. James, with only a few excursions outside to the surrounding Times Square area, he lures us into a gratifying confinement: we find ourselves locked in with a small band of theater animals and must abide by the morals and manners of their jungle. And by having us observe the work ethic of actors, one might even say their workaday honor, instead of titillating us with the backstage soap opera of love lives and career jockeying, *Birdman* brings us closer to the gritty struggle to make theater art than any other movie I've seen (with the exception of Mike Leigh's superb *Topsy-Turvy*).

When Riggan Thomas (Michael Keaton), a middle-aged ex-superstar trying to revive whatever artistry survives within him, works with the obnoxious but gifted Mike (Edward Norton) on a scene that was inert before Mike's hiring, we watch a lengthy medium-shot of the two seated actors facing each other. They volley lines, eliminate excess verbiage to tighten the rhythm, adjust their deliveries according to the shadings and nuances each hears in the other's voice, find the right tempo, and discover where the climax has to come. All this could have been staged conventionally in alternating close-ups, but the cutting would have hobbled the momentum. With both actors in view, we sense the dramatic current flowing between them and our excitement mounts with theirs. Rehearsal over, Mike cocks his head back, smiles conspiratorially at Riggan and grunts. The grunt means, "We're on our way, aren't we?" Congratulation and self-congratulation.

Once we take the work of such actors seriously, it becomes difficult to dismiss all the backstage snits, tears, tantrums, and intrigues as so much stereotypical theatrical fluff. These hardworking monomaniacs don't go into downtime easily; the pre-performance Sturm und Drang is the warm-up for the fireworks

on stage. And even the most hackneyed situations in this script by Nicolás Giacobone, Alexander Dinelaris Jr., and Armando Bo are redeemed by the quality of the dialogue that is by turns inventively nasty and economically poignant.

The movie's central story—the comeback of a has-been who stakes all on a production he writes, directs, and stars in—could have been the most clichéd element in *Birdman*, but Iñárritu and his writers make good use of it by zeroing in on two themes that are timely and interesting. And not just to theater buffs. Riggan Thomas gained international movie stardom by making a string of superhero movies reminiscent of the Batman franchise. Not coincidentally, Keaton himself helped launch the whole blockbuster superhero craze of the last two decades by starring in Tim Burton's two *Batman* films. And like the actor he plays in this film, Keaton found his career fading after his last performance as a superhero. The former Birdman is now trying to redeem himself with an almost absurdly high-minded project, an adaptation of Raymond Carver short stories. Riggan finds himself nagged and insulted by his old alter-ego: Birdman is simply that part of his mind that longs for all the celebrity perks and big money and press attention of the Hollywood years.

But Riggan resists Birdman's grumblings, and it's a real strength of this movie that it makes us understand why. In the world we now live in—the Andy Warhol world where people are famous for being famous—solid achievement is more detachable than ever from celebrity. Clearly, Riggan still hungers for the fame that proved evanescent. He tells his supportive ex-wife (played with poignance and strength by Amy Ryan) a painfully self-revealing memory of being on a flight with George Clooney and speculating that if the plane went down, the next day's headlines would be about Clooney, with only a few bottom-of-the-page remarks about himself. So why is he bothering with Raymond Carver instead of finagling his way back into blockbusters? Because early in the actor's stage career the great writer had sent a cocktail napkin backstage thanking Riggan for a memorable performance. The two anecdotes balance each other. The hunger for fame has been overtaken by the hunger for honorable work, but the less admirable hunger persists and irritates.

That theme of professional dedication is challenged by a second theme: the necessary selfishness of the serious artist, the selfishness often a corollary of the dedication. Riggan is willing to mortgage, perhaps lose, the house his ex-wife has always intended for their daughter Samantha, who is now recovering from drug addiction. And the actor's efforts to reunite with his child by making her his personal assistant are hampered by his absorption in his production and performance. Still in love with his ex-wife, he nevertheless doesn't dare to distance himself from his lover, who is also his play's leading lady (a bristly, funny, and tough Andrea Riseborough), for fear of upsetting her performance. One of Bernard Shaw's characters declares that money is not made in the light. Neither is art.

Conveying all this chaos, camaraderie, and pain is a cast that works with such ensemble perfection that I hesitate to single anyone out. But I will anyway. Michael Keaton's bursting energy made his Beetlejuice unforgettable in Tim Burton's masterpiece, and his Dogberry unbearable in Ken Branagh's adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing*. Now the older Keaton tamps that energy down and turns it into an inner fire, convincing you that Riggan is always watching, always caring, and always suffering because he can never seem to do the damage control necessary to keep work life and personal life in equipoise. Edward Norton's Mike is both the artistic gift that keeps giving and a constant pain in the ass. Emma Stone, who plays Samantha, impresses me again in this performance. She is, in my opinion, one of the two best movie actresses under thirty (along with Jennifer Lawrence). She makes every word of a diatribe against her father slice and dice—and how her chin juts out in her fury!—but when she finishes, the camera doesn't pan over to Keaton to get his reaction; it stays on her face and we see just the beginning of remorse take hold of her. Iñárritu gives his actors time to breathe so that we can see their emotions slowly shift or expand.

Critics have remarked on the virtuosity of Emmanuel Lubezki's long takes; the whole film is made to look like one long, continuous shot (an illusion, of course, accomplished, as it was in Hitchcock's *Rope*, by covering the seams between shots with some technical sleight-of-hand.) But what counts is not the virtuosity of the camera work but what it does for the story. The lengthy travelling shots through the labyrinth that is the St. James Theater—through lobby, corridors, dressing and costume rooms, into the wings among lighting boards and stagehands—seem like a tour through some vast machine whose output is emotions and dreams. No wonder these actors give the impression of being willing slaves. They are being devoured by what they love.

There's a fly in the ointment, and the fly's name is Federico Fellini. Perhaps Iñárritu couldn't help feeling the shadow of the Italian director's masterpiece *8 1/2* because it, too, was about a director coming to the end of his tether. Like *8 1/2*'s hero, Guido, Riggan periodically escapes into a fantasy world. Guido's daydreams both confirmed and deepened what the more realistic scenes told us about him. But when Riggan's fantasies have him take on Birdman's powers of flying and telekinesis, a contradiction blurs our view of the actor's inner life. Though he still longs for the perks that playing Birdman gave, he never felt empowered by the character. Quite the opposite, in fact, since the superhero role cheapened his talent. When, near the film's climax, he fantasy-flies above Times Square, we shouldn't see him, as we do, wafted aloft in Birdman's arms. It's his growing power as a theater artist that empowers him spiritually, so it would make more sense, and be more dramatically effective, if we saw him fly *away* from Birdman.

Oh well. If not a masterpiece, a near-masterpiece, and not to be missed. ■

Gabriel Said Reynolds

Strangers in Their Own Land

Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms

Gerard Russell
Basic Books, $28.99, 352 pp.

When the Islamic State (formerly known as ISIS, or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) conquered the city of Sinjar on August 3, thousands of Yazidis fled to the mountains. Many of the men who stayed behind were executed—some apparently buried alive—and many women were taken as wives (or, rather, slaves) for Islamic State fighters. The Islamic State's particularly brutal treatment of the Yazidis was based on their strict interpretation of Islamic law, according to which certain groups, including Christians, Jews, and "Sabians," can be tolerated as "People of the Book," but others such as the Yazidis have no choice but conversion to Islam or death. The actions of the Islamic State in Sinjar put the very future of the Yazidi community of Iraq in jeopardy. Today the Yazidis are one of a number of minority religious groups in the Middle East who are at risk of disappearing completely from their ancestral homelands.

In *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms* Gerard Russell, a former British diplomat, tells the story of these groups and his journeys among them, from Egypt to Pakistan. As the book's title suggests, Russell is fascinated with these religious minorities because of the way many of them have preserved ancient cults whose roots are independent of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. Russell opens the introduction provocatively: "Imagine that the worship of the goddess Aphrodite was still continuing on a remote Greek island…. In the Middle East, in contrast to Europe, equally ancient religions survived." It is these religions whose survival interests Russell. In all he tells the story of seven communities: Mandaeans (often described as "Christians of St. John," but in fact not Christians at all), Yazidis (or Ezidis), Zoroastrians, Druze, Samaritans, Copts (who are of course Christians, but whose social situation is similar to the other communities), and the Kalasha of northern Pakistan.

Mir Ali Beg (seated), High Priest of the Yazidis, 1909

What these groups have in common is that they have managed to survive in what have become mostly Islamic societies. Russell explains how the Mandaeans were able to survive partly because of their remote location in the marshes in southern Iraq where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers meet. There they practiced a religion marked by repeated baptism ceremonies, astrology, and spells. In order to avoid persecution by Muslim Iraqis the Mandaeans came to identify themselves as "Sabians," as the Qur'an (2:62; 5:69) names "Sabians" (along with Jews and Christians) as a group "upon which is no fear." Early Muslims were not certain who these Qur'anic Sabians were, and the Mandaeans took advantage of their uncertainty to claim this title, and thereby to win a tolerated status in Islamic society along with Jews and Christians. In recent years, however, the condition of the Mandaeans has changed dramatically for the worse. In the 1990s Saddam Hussein drained most of the marshes of southern Iraq in an effort to deprive the Shiite rebels of a refuge. This, together with the pressures of modernity, has led most Mandaeans to leave their ancestral home for other cities in Iraq or for the West. In fact today more Mandaeans live outside Iraq than inside. Those Mandaeans who remain in Iraq have been exposed to kidnappings and forced conversions at the hands of Sunni Islamists.

The experience of the Yazidis (who number about seven hundred thousand worldwide, about ten times larger than the Mandaean population) has been no less traumatic. Yazidism, which may have roots in pre-Islamic Mithraism, has been heavily influenced by Islam and in particular by Sufism. (One of the founders of Yazidism as we know it was a Muslim Sufi named Adi ibn Musafir.) The central figure among seven holy beings in Yazidism is the "peacock angel," Malak Tawus, a manifestation of the unknowable God. Yazidis recount a story about Malak Tawus that is similar to one the Qur'an tells about the devil—namely, that he refused God's command to bow down to Adam (Yazidis, unlike Muslims, hold that God forgave him). For this reason, Muslims (and others) have often accused Yazidis of devil worship, even though Yazidis do not think of Malak Tawus as the devil or Satan. When the fighters of the Islamic State took over Sinjar, they announced

on social media their victory over the "devil worshippers." With the decline of the secular state in Iraq and the rise of Islamists, the Yazidis of Iraq—unlike Yazidis in non-Islamic countries such as Armenia and Georgia—find themselves in extreme peril.

The Zoroastrian community of Iran is also in peril, although not because of jihadis. Today this community, centered in the ancient desert city of Yazd, numbers only around ten thousand, though there are about a hundred fifty thousand Zoroastrians worldwide. In *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms* Russell describes how difficult it was to find any Zoroastrians when he travelled to Yazd, and how the hills (or *dakhmas*) where the bodies of the Zoroastrian dead were once exposed have fallen out of use. But Russell also notes the widespread appreciation in Iran for the country's Zoroastrian heritage—in contrast with Iraq, for example, where there is little interest in the country's pre-Islamic traditions. Indeed the most important holiday in Iran is still Nawruz, a New Year's festival rooted in Zoroastrian tradition.

Unlike Mandeanism and Zoroastrianism, the Druze faith is not pre-Islamic. It emerged during the period of the medieval Shiite Fatimid empire and was influenced by Pythagorean and neo-Platonic ideas. Whereas the Mandaeans seek legitimacy in an Islamic state by identifying themselves as Sabians, the Druze survive by keeping their religious doctrine secret. To outsiders the Druze present themselves simply as Muslims. In fact, the inner truths of the Druze faith—revealed only to certain members of the community who have gone through initiation rites—are dramatically different from Islamic teaching. The Druze faith teaches that God manifested himself on earth in the form of the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim, and that Islamic law has been abrogated. The Druze are a large community in Syria, Lebanon, and Israel (numbering almost 1.5 million) and they have largely avoided persecution. In the West, however, the Druze have struggled to maintain their identity.

One of the most surprising chapters in *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms* is about the smallest of all the groups Russell met in his travels: the Samaritans. The remaining eight hundred Samaritans live in two places: a single neighborhood in Tel Aviv or a small village near the West Bank city of Nablus on top of Mount Gerizim, where, according to Samaritan belief, Adam was created, Abraham made his sacrifice, and the true temple of God was built. A century ago there were only about a hundred twenty-five Samaritans left. Faced with extinction, the community was able to grow again because of strict rules against marriage outside the community (with an exception for women marrying into the community), positive relationships with both Jews and Palestinians, and the virtual end of conversions to Islam since the establishment of the State of Israel. Of all the religious communities Russell writes about, the Samaritans are the only ones who seem to have a bright future in their ancestral land.

By contrast, the Copts—or Egyptian Christians—are by far the largest community covered in *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms*, numbering 5 to 10 million. Yet they have suffered both from systematic discrimination by the state and from regular acts of violence. Russell describes how various Egyptian leaders (notably Sadat) have sought to win the support of Islamists by having state schools glorify Islam and ignore Christianity and by enforcing traditional elements of Islamic law, such as the prohibition against the conversion of Muslims to Christianity or the marriage of Muslim women to Christian men. At the same time, attacks on churches or Christian homes—often prompted by rumors that a Christian man has slept with a Muslim girl or that a church is being built or repaired without a permit—have become alarmingly common. This is partly because the state has been notoriously weak in punishing acts of anti-Christian violence. For example, when sixteen Christians were killed in a single incident in 2000, none of the perpetrators received a prison sentence of more than two years. At the same time Russell describes the general rise in piety among Copts, and suggests that this is not a coincidence. He quotes one Egyptian Christian as stating, "As long as you feel threatened by the others, your identity will be strong."

Finally Russell describes his 2012 visit to a remote corner of northern Pakistan where the Kalasha, a small community of about five thousand, have preserved their pre-Islamic polytheistic religion. As recently as a hundred fifty years ago, a large area of what is now northern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan remained polytheistic. It was known to Muslims as Kafiristan, "the land of the infidels." A campaign of forced conversion led almost all its residents to embrace Islam except for those in three Pakistani valleys. Since then, the Kalasha's religious festivals have become popular tourist attractions, and some Greeks have invested in schools meant to preserve the religion, language, and culture of the Kalasha, who are believed to be descendents of Alexander the Great. Nevertheless, the Kalasha religion remains at risk of extinction. Conversions to Islam continue, and in Pakistan—as in so many other Islamic countries—once someone has converted to Islam, there is no going back.

In books about Islam or Muslim-Christian relations, it is often said that Islam has traditionally been comparatively tolerant of minorities. *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms* complicates that portrayal. It describes the "great harshness" with which the Zoroastrians have been treated in Iran (where, for example, they were not allowed to testify against a Muslim in court). Samaritans, we learn, were required to wear bells in public and were prohibited from riding horses until the eighteenth century. In the 1830s, twenty thousand Christians from the Church of the East died in a massacre organized by the Ottomans. Today, with the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the hardline Islamic regime in Iran, and the increasing radicalization of Pakistan and Egypt, the situation of religious minorities in the Middle East seems worse than ever.

Maybe this is why Russell includes an epilogue about the growth of Middle Eastern minority religions in the United States. Yazidis have settled in Buffalo and Lincoln, Nebraska, while the Church of the East is building churches in Detroit. Russell even describes a Mandaean baptism in the Charles River in Boston. Yet he also notes that the transplanting of Middle Eastern religious minorities to the West has been a double-edged sword. Members of these groups have found safety and sometimes success in their adoptive country, but they have also found it difficult to maintain their community's identity and religious commitment in the face of pressures to assimilate. As Russell writes, "I wondered whether coming to America must always be a back-loaded contract for immigrant communities—get the benefit of prosperity now, pay the price of loss of identity later." One Mandaean American puts this more dramatically, insisting that the U.S. policy of welcoming Mandaeans under asylum laws is "saving Mandaeans, and killing Mandaeanism."

So what can be done to support religious minorities in their ancestral homeland? Russell argues convincingly that any programs meant to help Christians (or other minorities) in the Middle East must also help their Muslim neighbors. He also argues that "violence comes at the end of a long process of radicalization" and insists that the West must encourage countries in the Middle East to work against the incitement of religious hatred. The place to begin is the educational curriculum. In the end, *Heirs to Forgotten Kingdoms* is much more than a catalogue of obscure religions in the Middle East. It is as much about Islam as it is about minority religions, and it raises questions about religious freedom, interreligious relations, and tolerance that should concern believers in any religion, or none. ■

Gabriel Said Reynolds *is professor of Islamic studies and theology at the University of Notre Dame and co-director of the International Qur'anic Studies Association.*

Dominic Preziosi

Pietà & Meatballs

My Two Italies

Joseph Luzzi
Farrar, Straus and Giroux; $23, 224 pp.

The room my wife and I were led to on the first evening of our Sicilian honeymoon had a warped linoleum floor, a sway-backed bed, and a cracked plastic chair in the corner. The shower curtain was torn and mildewed; ants crawled on the melting lump of soap. Outside the single window, down in the alley, a kitchen worker poured another bucket of scraps onto the moldering heap of clam shells and cantaloupe rinds. We checked out before we could fully check in, explaining that this was not what the brochure had promised. The desk clerk shrugged, conceding nothing, but asked if we'd stay for something to eat. We were treated to fresh linguine pesto served in hand-painted bowls on a shady stone terrace scented by orange and lemon blossoms, the Mediterranean glittering nearby, Monte Pellegrino golden in the distance.

From the "disgusting & odious" to the "sublime and lovely," to paraphrase Shelley, whose formulation the "two Italies" Joseph Luzzi uses for the title of his memoir. Part personal and cultural history, part scholarly reflection, this brief but expansive book documents Luzzi's attempts to reconcile the conflicting experiences of his own, hyphenless Italian American upbringing, along with his investigation into the split nature of Italy itself: How can a civilization that produced Michelangelo and Verdi and Fellini also have spawned the Mafia, Mussolini, and Silvio Berlusconi? How can the corrupt and the beautiful reside so closely?

Luzzi approaches the question from an interesting position. He is not of the huge second generation born to the huddled masses associated with late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century immigration, but rather came of age in 1970s and '80s Rhode Island, the only American-born child in a large family recently arrived from the impoverished region of Calabria. This accident of origin is fodder for some of the numerous "two Italy" pairings Luzzi (now a professor at Bard College) will write about. He is a modern American boy with parents who barely speak English and still slaughter their own rabbits and goats for dinner. But he's also out of step with his contemporaries-in-heritage, the third- and fourth-generation Italian Americans whose fullest expression of ethnicity is realized in chicken parmigiana, *The Godfather*—the movie, not the novel—*The Sopranos*, and the reality TV show *Jersey Shore*. Not only does he aspire to artistic pursuits and an advanced liberal-arts education, he's also keenly aware of the distance these may put between himself and his past, and between himself and his family—the male members of which are mainly physical laborers. (At

Placanica, Italy

PHOTO: MARCUSCALABRESUS

one point, the men gather tribunal-style to decide on appropriate punishment for an adulterous wife.)

Some of his anecdotes will feel familiar to any Italian American who remembers a grandfather diligently wrapping his fig tree in burlap for the winter or a black-clad nona making devotions to the parish's patron saint. Yet Luzzi's memories are not from decades long gone but from the relatively recent past. And though Luzzi (rightly, in my opinion) bemoans the unwillingness of his fellow Italian Americans to engage with different expressions of their culture—indeed, why aren't more of us reading the novels of John Fante or Pietro di Donato's immigration-era *Christ in Concrete* than reciting lines from *Goodfellas*?—it feels as if he punts instead of offering an explanation for it:

> *The Godfather* and *The Sopranos* offer an American morality play of upward mobility through the acquisition of power, money, and prestige. Where else might Italian Americans turn for their master narrative...? I don't think that the great Italian American book or film will ever be created. Such a story would require a powerful organizing myth. We Italian Americans commemorate our past only to remind ourselves of how far we have traveled from it. Our pride in our ancestors grows with the distance we set between them and ourselves.

But if a punt, it's a good tactical move that positions Luzzi for the strongest part of his memoir—the more compelling material on Italy itself. Or make that "the Italies themselves." Luzzi, through numerous, almost compulsive visits to the Old Country, seeks to bridge some of that distance "we set between them and ourselves," even while positing theories for Italy's vexing dichotomies. A number of these are discussed: Is it the relative youth of a country (Italy was unified only in 1861) built out of a disparate and fractious collection of regions and city-states? Is it the *questione della lingua*—the "momentous" problem of language where regional dialects still hold sway over the "official" Tuscan that Dante and Boccaccio composed in? Or is it the unhelpful enshrinement of abstractions like *bella figura* (the importance of creating a fine impression above all) and *sprezzatura* (studied nonchalance) as collective virtues? Perhaps it's all of the above, and at the same time (this being Italy), none.

Along the way, Luzzi contrasts the beauty and art of Florence with the gaucheness and verve of Naples and the stubborn poverty and harsh terrain of the mezzogiorno, including his ancestral Calabrian village, still home to numerous relatives. And he's not shy about the conflicted responses such differences evoke in him, which makes for affecting and at times touching writing—especially in passages on how the sudden death of his wife unpredictably shapes his assessments. He also bolsters these sections with reporting, on such uniquely Italian cultural phenomena as the *mammoni* ("mama's boys," adult men still living at home with their mothers); on the bureaucratic red tape that can make even the purchase of a stamp a hellish experience; on the country's occasional escape from political and economic dysfunction (such as 1987's *il sorpasso*, "the overtaking" of Britain by Italy as the world's fifth-largest economy) and its seemingly inevitable decline as signaled today by brain-drain, falling birthrates, and the recent return to recession.

Yet visitors still reliably flock to the Duomo and the Colosseum. Luzzi ultimately resists crafting a simple, single explanation for the challenge that is Italy—but he quotes a thought-provoking passage from Lampedusa's *The Leopard*: "[The visiting British officers] were ecstatic about the view, the light; they confessed though, that they had been horrified at the squalor and filth of the streets around. I didn't explain to them that one thing was derived from the other." When symptoms are causes and causes are symptoms, maybe there's little point in explaining. To use a versatile phrase bequeathed by the *paesani* to American English: *Whaddya gonna do?* Of course, as our old relatives will tell you, it sounds much nicer in Italian. ■

Dominic Preziosi *is* Commonweal*'s digital editor.*

Stephen J. Pope

Help Me Help You

Evolution, Games, and God

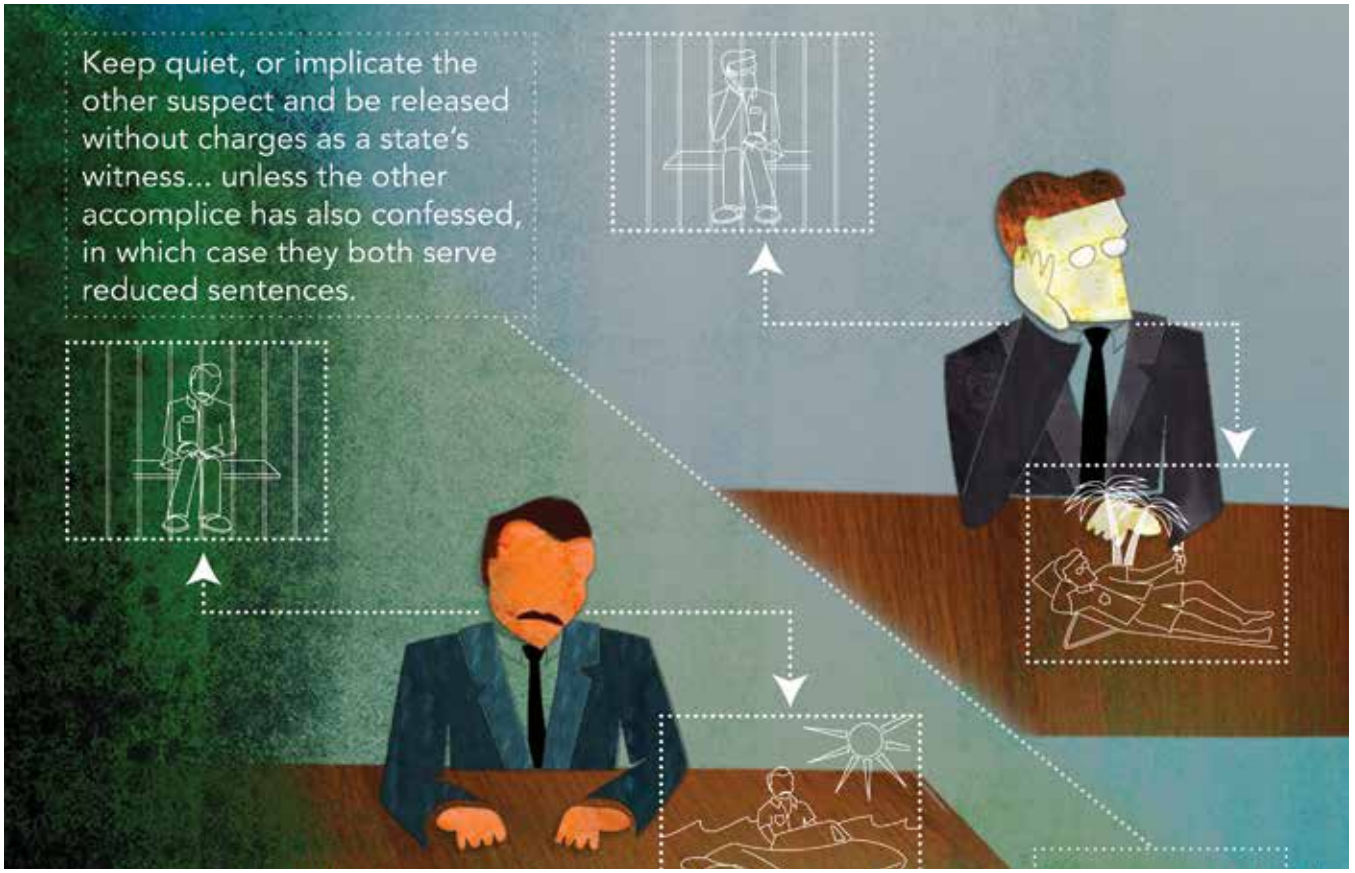
The Principle of Cooperation
Edited by Martin A. Nowak and Sarah Coakley
Harvard University Press, $35, 416 pp.

"Nice guys finish last." "Look out for number one." Those and other bits of conventional wisdom testify to the grip modern individualism has on the popular imagination. If competition is the "real world," then Christ's message of inclusive love amounts to hopeless idealism. *Evolution, Games, and God* challenges us to think otherwise. The book came out of the work of a research group that met periodically for three years at Harvard under the leadership of theologian Sarah Coakley and mathematical biologist Martin Nowak.

The book's purpose is to show that evolutionary processes can give rise to many forms of cooperation. After all, humans aren't only competitive. We can be cooperative and altruistic too. More cooperative organisms sometimes beat out uncooperative organisms. Under some conditions, cooperation is stabilized in a population, and under others it's eliminated. The development of our own species proceeded only because we can carry out large-scale ventures cooperatively.

The power of cooperation can be seen in key moments of transition in the evolutionary process. The shift from asexual reproduction to sexual reproduction, for example, involved a quantum jump in cooperative activities between organisms. Indeed, "whenever life discovers a new level or organization (such as the emergence of cells, multicellar organisms, insect societies, or human language)," Coakley and Nowak write, "cooperation is involved in one form or another." Cooperation emerged as a central strategy used by organisms to cope with environmental challenges. Early humans lived in highly interdependent hunter-gatherer groups. Language allowed them to share what they had learned, to make plans for the future, and to communicate from a distance. The development of complex societies in the ancient world was made possible by the domestication of animals and development of large-scale agriculture.

The book takes its definition of cooperation from evolutionary biology: "a form of working together in which one individual pays a cost (in terms of fitness, whether genetic or cultural) and another gains a benefit as a result." Nowak and Coakley distinguish cooperation from "altruism," which they define as "a form of (costly) cooperation



CHRISTOPHER X. JON JENSEN (CXJJENSEN) & GREG RIESTENBERG

Screen capture of Prisoner's Dilemma, *an illustrated introduction to game theory*

to which an individual is motivated by goodwill or love for another (or others)." The notion of love as willing the good of the other resonates with Thomas Aquinas's "love of benevolence." The vast background of evolutionary cooperation provides the natural conditions for the emergence of our distinctively human capacities for altruism.

Nowak is one of the world's foremost mathematical biologists. He calls attention to the way modern evolutionary game theory helps explain the emergence of cooperation as a convergent evolutionary strategy. The Prisoner's Dilemma game sets up a contest in which two players are required to choose how to interact with one another in a way that best advances their individual interests. There are two possible strategies: a cooperator pays a benefit (b) at some cost to herself (c); a cheat extracts a benefit from another player but at no cost to herself. In one-time interactions, the "most rational" strategy is to cheat the other player because that allows you to get a benefit at no cost to yourself. But if there are many interactions, then cooperation emerges as a successful strategy, because when cheats are identified nobody will cooperate with them anymore. Over time, selfish players become less "fit" than cooperators.

Nowak provides a concise summary of the five mechanisms that resolve social dilemmas in ways that involve cooperation: "kin selection," "direct reciprocity," "indirect reciprocity," "network reciprocity" (or "special selection"), and "group selection." Cooperation is more likely to emerge between agents who are biologically related than between those who are not; those who cooperate with kin are more likely to leave descendants than their less cooperative counterparts. The two forms of reciprocity involve trading benefits either directly (I help you and you help me, now or later) or indirectly (I help you now, then you help my friend, and then my friend helps me later).

It's hard to overstate the significance of indirect reciprocity for human communities. We are naturally adapted to live in relatively small communities in which one person's willingness to help another is based on the recipient's reputation. Empirical studies have shown that we are more likely to help people with cooperative reputations. It is a losing evolutionary strategy to pay costs that benefit others without receiving any benefits in return. Some animals practice rudimentary indirect reciprocity, but humans have developed it in very robust ways. Doing so requires intelligence, memory, imagination, empathy, language, and other cognitive capacities that are distinctive to humanity. Indirect reciprocity is also one of the major building blocks of morality.

Nowak calls the fourth mechanism "network reciprocity." In any given society, Nowak argues, cooperators benefit one another by forming network clusters within which they cooperate with one another. Spatial structures shape likelihood of cooperation. This resonates with ordinary experience, in that we are more prone to help or depend on well-known reciprocators in our own subcommunities than we are to help or depend on complete strangers.

The fifth mechanism, group selection, is the most controversial because it suggests that selection operates not only on individuals but also on groups. The model predicts that in situations in which groups compete with one another, those made up of pure cooperators are more successful than groups of pure cheats. At the same time, selection within groups of both cooperators and cheats tends to favor the cheats. This model proposes a multilevel process of natural selection in which lower-level selection (within groups) favors defectors but higher level selection (between groups) favors cooperators.

The five mechanisms work for game theory, but Coakley and Nowak—and others—think they also track features of real-world evolutionary processes. Human beings are wired for cooperation, possess a high capacity for empathy, and appreciate and reward loyalty. Conscience, our sense of right and wrong, is highly sensitive to issues of fairness.

Mapping evolutionary possibilities through game theory makes sense, but how does God fit in? Religion is one of the main expressions of our cooperative instincts. Some cognitive scientists of religion hypothesize that God functions as a kind of supernatural reciprocity monitor that enforces cooperation and punishes cheating. Theologians who emphasize the Cross regard theories of evolutionary cooperation as largely irrelevant to Christian ethics. The Gospel teaches unconditional love of neighbor, even if he's a cheat. Theologians whose focus is the Incarnation seek to understand evolutionary building blocks, including cooperative tendencies, so they can be used for higher ends. Indeed, Coakley suggests that the Creator produced the fundamental conditions of the cosmos in such a way that it gave rise to an evolutionary process—with all its pain, contingency, creativity, and beauty—that in turn would lead to the emergence of intelligent beings capable of highly complex forms of cooperation. God works providentially both within the evolutionary process and from without it, Coakley writes, in order to elicit the potential for goodness present in the created order. The same is true for humanity. As created in the image of God, we are called to pattern our lives after a Triune God characterized by an eternal communion of love. We are called to center our lives on charity, a grace-inspired love that goes beyond trading costs and benefits to genuine friendship with God—and one another.

Coakley and Nowak's book provides an excellent resource for anyone who wants to learn about current thinking at the nexus of evolutionary theory, ethics, and theology. The editors managed to avoid the unevenness of quality that marks many essay collections. The contributors engage one another, sometimes critically. This is one of the best books on this topic in the past decade. ■

Stephen J. Pope *is a professor of theological ethics at Boston College, and the author of* Human Evolution and Christian Ethics *(Cambridge University Press).*

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Paige E. Hochschild

The Ties That Bind?

'Til Faith Do Us Part

How Interfaith Marriage is Transforming America

Naomi Schaefer Riley

Oxford University Press, $24.95, 256 pp.

Since 1960, the number of interfaith marriages in the United States has more than doubled. During the same period, there has been a seismic shift in the relationship between religious identity and cultural-ethnic identity in general. Today, membership in a religious community is much more likely a matter of choice and conversion than it was fifty years ago. In *'Til Faith Do Us Part*, Naomi Schaefer Riley argues that couples considering marriage frequently underestimate the significance of religion. According to Riley, an "individualistic ethos" in contemporary practices of dating and marriage often gives rise to a tension between individual fulfillment and the deep desire for community. No doubt the same ethos affects the way Americans think about faith—primarily as a choice, and a personally fulfilling one. This ethos can conflict with the claims of culture and family heritage, in which faith can be deeply planted.

Interfaith marriage is therefore both a cause and an effect of profound and rapid cultural change. Stanley Fish, in the *New York Times*, detects in Riley's book a "cautionary thesis; the growing number of interfaith couples don't know what they're getting into." Gustav Niebuhr, also writing in the *Times*, finds interfaith marriage to be an inevitable part of the pluralistic experiment of American immigration. Interfaith marriage is good, he says, to the extent that it "dispels ignorance, punches holes in stereotypes and deflates bias." These are both fair readings, but they overlook Riley's more fundamental anxiety about the deracination and deculturation that interfaith marriage often brings about.

Riley, a former editor at the *Wall Street Journal*, has collected statistical data from 2,450 Americans, along with powerful anecdotal accounts. She herself is part of an interfaith union (she is Jewish, her husband a lapsed Jehovah's Witness). The book considers the meaning of marriage, dating and marriage preparation, the marriage ceremony itself, decisions about child-rearing, holidays and other observances, and finally divorce. Riley devotes particular attention to American Jews and Mormons: to Jews because, of all Americans, they are the most likely to intermarry, much to the distress of many of their religious and cultural leaders; to Mormons, because they are the least likely to intermarry. While Mormons are friendly to spouses of other faiths, the strong sense of community and the high honor placed on marriage tends to lead to the conversion of the non-LDS spouse: membership in this community has distinct privileges. Riley also considers the situation of Muslims, who seem to be heading down the same road as Jews, facing a high rate of intermarriage and assimilation, as well as an increasing number of conversions. One imam recounts the great difficulty of articulating to young Muslims the good of marriage within one's community in a culture where individual autonomy and choice is primary. But Riley meets another imam who tries to convince young Muslims to marry outside their ethnic group, and to privilege instead the commonalities of belief among different religious communities.

PORTOBELLOW FILMS

Our culture is full of moving stories about love defying all odds, particularly familial opposition and cultural bias. The more obstacles to be overcome, the more romantic the drama. Marriage itself becomes a footnote to the main experience, falling in love. Many of the couples in Riley's book follow this pattern: We met, we fell in love, and the rest is history. Religion becomes one of many minor details in this story—either as an obstacle or as a convenient coincidence. Ceremonies of union and birth generally bring to light questions of faith that were formerly thought to be unimportant; until then, such questions are rarely discussed. This is partly because most people find their spouses in their twenties, a period when religious observance often fades. Riley thinks marriages are often weaker as a result of this pattern, and the statistical data appear to support this claim.

In her interviews with ministers and other officiants of wedding ceremonies, Riley found a wide variation in how different communities handle interfaith marriage. A significant problem is inconsistency between teaching and practice. In the absence of Orthodox conversion, interfaith marriage is not traditionally permissible for Jews; it is disallowed in the Torah. Nevertheless, one can find directories of rabbis in New York willing to officiate at the marriage of a Jew and a non-Jew. Many other religious communities, such as the Eastern Orthodox, explicitly forbid interfaith marriage. Jehovah's Witnesses are discouraged from even becoming friends with people outside their faith community. Riley notes that the Catholic Church is ahead of the curve in accommodating and supporting interfaith marriage: it has clear procedures for spouses of other faiths and a period of marriage preparation that encourages discussion of such matters.

Two of Riley's observations are particularly striking. First, when persons

of different faiths marry, the ceremonies they choose tend to reflect not one faith or the other, but instead a measured rejection of both. Riley recounts the discomfort of one Evangelical pastor who was asked not to mention the name of Jesus, lest the Jewish spouse's family be offended. Second, Riley finds that this desire for compromise shapes the subsequent culture of married life: spouses tend to be less observant, and to delegate any religious instruction of children to institutions outside the family, precisely in order to avoid conflict within the marriage.

It's worth noting here the distinctive scope of Riley's research. All her respondents are part of a marriage in which at least one of the spouses still identifies with a particular faith community. This is obviously not true of many couples who grew up in different religious traditions. Riley notes that the challenges of an interfaith marriage—unfriendly family, an unwilling pastor, or ethnic tension—often lead spouses to reject religion altogether. The most difficult situations arise when one spouse becomes more or less observant after marriage, giving rise to a sense of betrayal on both sides: Who has this person I married become?

The children of interfaith marriages are less likely to be baptized or to undergo some other birth ceremony—but not much less likely (45 percent versus "just over half"). Nevertheless, in the case of interfaith marriages, the support of religious institutions in the upbringing of children is more crucial than ever, given the absence of a family culture that supports the nourishing of faith.

In the United States today both religion and marriage are more about choice than obligation. From a certain perspective, this may appear to be a great strength, since respecting individual choice helps dissolve the prejudices that can arise with cultural-ethnic membership. The choice to accept Christ as one's personal Lord and Savior is the foundation for membership in many flourishing Evangelical churches, but for other churches the foundation is sacramental, with the emphasis primarily God's action, not our own. Here, belonging is only secondarily a matter of choice. Marriage, too, can be understood as something more than the choice of two individuals, ordered to mutual affective fulfillment. Through marriage, whole families are brought into relation, one with one another, shifting and enriching their cultures; persons are drawn into the sacramental and canonical reality of the church in a new way. These networks of relationship are not chosen. We do not choose our parents or our siblings, for example, but these relationships are no less important, and no less binding, for not having been chosen.

Riley notes that interfaith marriages involving Protestant Evangelicals have the highest rate of divorce. She does not speculate about the reasons for this, but it's fair to ask whether the Evangelical model of membership doesn't have something to do with it. Faith communities where membership is defined by a powerful individual experience, or a very particular doctrinal conviction, often show evidence of great vitality, but their membership is rarely stable. When everything rides on a powerful experience, even with noble perseverance, one's sense of belonging and obligation may have less to support it. The triad of culture, faith, and marriage is not easily pulled apart. Riley observes that religious pluralism accompanies a socially weak conception of marriage and community. This is why the new prominence of interfaith marriage merits critical discussion. ■

Paige E. Hochschild *is an assistant professor of theology at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland.*

CLASSIFIED

The Silent Treatment

Win Bassett

For at least three hundred hours this past summer, I practiced what not to say. Most people who have completed a unit of clinical pastoral education (CPE), a standardized training program in hospital chaplaincy, describe their experience as a lesson in listening—often silently. Silence is easy in theory but often difficult in practice. We know we should let others tell their stories, but we often feel a strong urge to interrupt someone else's story with a similar story of our own. By contrast, understanding what not to say is tough both in theory and in practice.

In August of this year, the poet Gregory Orr wrote in the *New York Times* about losing his faith as a child. He didn't stop believing because his younger brother died after Orr accidently shot him while hunting. He lost his faith because "a well-meaning adult assured me that my dead brother was already, at that very moment, sitting down in heaven to feast with Jesus." Orr continued, "How could I tell her that my brother was still near me, still horribly close to me—that every time I squeezed shut my eyes to keep out the world, I saw him lying lifeless at my feet?"

During my training at the hospital, I, too, occasionally found myself offering unhelpful words when I needed to say something to a patient. For example, after hearing countless patients and family members suggest that an illness might be a test or an ordeal that God wished a patient to endure, I caught myself saying, "You'll be stronger having gone through this." I'd instantly regret saying this, since most of my patients had no chance of gaining strength.

Similarly, a day didn't pass without my hearing a patient's illness or pain described as "God's will." I sometimes uttered that phrase myself. At other times, I bristled at it. I wish that more of my encounters unfolded like those in Stephen Dunn's poem "A Coldness": "And I wished his wife / would say A shame / instead of God's will. Or if God / had such a will, Shame on Him."

Another expression one too often hears at hospitals: "Everything happens for a reason." Patients who were offered this bit of cheap wisdom would often reply by asking what the reason could be for a motor vehicle accident or the diabetes that had taken one of their limbs. "Surely God is great, and we do not know him," Elihu says in the Book of Job. "Can anyone understand the spreading of the clouds, the thunderings of his pavilion?"

Instead of trafficking in speculations about why a person experiences pain or becomes ill, I found it far more helpful to ask the question "What now?" Reynolds Price wrote that after his cancer diagnosis "the kindest thing anyone could have done for me… would have been to look me square in the eye and say this clearly, 'Reynolds Price is dead. Who will you be now?'" I once presented this passage from Price at a conference, and a participant who had survived breast cancer told me that, years ago, she playfully added "2.0" at the end of her name.

Nevertheless, I bet she sometimes heard the wrong words at the wrong times during her recovery. We've all said them, and we don't do it because we fail to understand that these responses are theologically indefensible. We utter these words because they seem to be the only things that might give momentary comfort. Because these dubious phrases have become our default expression of consolation, we need God's help to put them aside, to remain silent until we have something truer and therefore more helpful to say. Sometimes the words never come, and silence itself is enough. With or without words, chaplains are there to offer another loving presence, sometimes the *only* loving presence. As the Episcopal priest and poet Spencer Reece writes in a poem about his own experience in a hospital chaplaincy, "It is correct to love even at the wrong time." ■

Win Bassett *has written for the* Atlantic*, the* Paris Review Daily*, the* Los Angeles Review of Books*, and* Guernica*. He is now a graduate student at Yale Divinity School.*

CNS PHOTO / JOSE LUIS AGUIRRE, CATHOLIC SAN FRANCISCO

Journal of Catholic Social Thought

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A forthcoming issue will focus on

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- How do issues of social (in)justice such as immigration, incarceration, hunger, homelessness, living wage issues, and services for mental illness/addiction impact families?
- How has the understanding of church-world relationship been shaped over the past five decades through a specific concern related to the family?
- What contemporary challenges to the family have yet to be addressed or adequately developed in the social thought of the Church?

Manuscript due date: October 15, 2015

Forward to: Dr. Barbara Wall at barbara.wall@villanova.edu

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