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APRIL 11, 2014

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ARTICLE

SHORT TAKE

FILM

Diogo Morgado as Jesus Christ in Son of God

20TH CENTURY FOX

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LETTERS

The Amish, Obamacare, bad vows

OPTING OUT—OF YOUR ARTICLE

Donald Kraybill's article about the Amish "Opting Out" (March 7) was very disappointing. We were looking forward to learning more about the Amish, and we didn't. There was no warmth or human element in the article—it read like clinical observations on an odd batch of laboratory mice. If the author ever actually talked to an Amish person, it didn't show. It was like a dull lecture by a second-rate professor.

GEORGE AND CAROL ALMAS
Katonah, N.Y.

AMISH CATHOLIC

Thank you for publishing Kraybill's superb "Opting Out." I'll say what he didn't: We Catholics could—and should—learn a lot from the wisdom of the Amish. I can think of few more pressing matters than the ones they've put front and center in their lives: discerning appropriate technologies, sustaining local communities, and the importance of nonviolence. Moreover, I find much in the Amish economy—with its emphasis on craft and other small-scale enterprises—compelling. It's an economics reminiscent not of capitalism but of the distributism articulated by luminaries such as G. K. Chesterton, Dorothy Day, and E. F. Schumacher.

I find it telling that there is significant interest in the Amish's "slow and simple" way of life. The broader culture's technological and consumerist frenzy leaves more and more of us spiritually barren. At least that is my experience living on a Catholic Worker farm here in Iowa, where we live in a village-like community and practice small-scale organic agriculture. A small but growing stream of visitors comes to catch a glimpse of our simpler life on the land. Indeed, sometimes they wonder if we're trying to live like the Amish.

ERIC ANGLADA
La Motte, Iowa

CLEAN BILL OF HEALTH

Rand Richards Cooper in "Give It to Us Straight, Doc" (March 7) cuts through all the hot air surrounding the Affordable Care Act, its rollout, and coverage. The Obama administration lost a great opportunity to frame the problems and the solutions right from the start. This article clearly and concisely shows what is at stake for each demographic in our country. Thank you.

MARIE BARRY
Gaithersburg, Md.

BROKEN VOWS

Anne Chapman's letter (February 7, 2014), in response to John Garvey's column, "'I Do,' Undone" (December 20, 2013), briefly notes that bishops and cardinals take special vows to the church and the institution (papal/administrative) even if it sometimes requires secrecy.

Such vows are surely in contradiction to the central mission of the church. Why do we celebrate the epiphany, the "shining forth," if administrative structures must be protected by drawing the curtain?

When a bishop "covers up" cases of clergy who sexually abuse children, we evidently are not looking at a weak, indecisive bishop; we are observing instead a bishop who, by covering up the problem, is simply fulfilling a vow.

No wonder Catholics are leaving the church. The existence of such vows is heartbreaking, perhaps faith-breaking. They imply and encourage a culture of concealment and exclusion—the very opposite of "shining forth."

Surely prayers, and action, are in order.

JUDY LITTLE
Carbondale, Ill.

From the Editors

Going It Alone

Facing an economic emergency when he first took office, President Barack Obama was inclined to give bankers and business leaders whatever room for maneuver they needed in order to restore growth. Now, five years into a recovery that has failed to help many of the workers and homeowners who suffered most from the fallout of the 2008 financial crisis, the president has turned his attention to income inequality. The shift in priorities is welcome, if also long overdue.

Since the recession ended, corporate profits have doubled and are now at record highs; meanwhile, the share of national income that is paid to workers has fallen to an all-time low. The financial industry, buoyed by the Federal Reserve, is back to its old opulent ways. Last year, Wall Street paid out $26.7 billion in bonuses—which, as former Labor Secretary Robert Reich has pointed out, is enough to double the pay of all full-time minimum-wage workers.

Of course, there's a limit to what a president can do when the party in control of one house of Congress denies that income inequality is even a problem. The GOP's obduracy on this issue has kept the federal government from adopting any policy that might increase the take-home pay of low-income workers. Despite overwhelming public support for raising the minimum wage, for example, House Republicans have dismissed the idea as a job-killer. Most economists disagree, but nowadays conservative politicians don't seem to worry about what most economists think: whenever the "ivory tower" contradicts lobbyists for the "job creators," the GOP ignores it. Happily, the president has found a few ways to address income inequality that don't require congressional support. He recently issued an executive order raising the minimum wage for all federal contractors to $10.10 an hour. And now he has directed the Labor Department to make more U.S. workers eligible for overtime pay.

The principle of extra pay for extra work, established in law by the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act, is today routinely sidestepped by employers. While anyone paid by the hour gets 1.5 times his or her base wage for overtime work, salaried workers who earn more than $455 a week are exempt from overtime pay as long as their employer classifies their jobs as executive, administrative, or professional. As a result, manual laborers who happen to supervise other manual laborers are being counted as executives, and employers are promoting workers to salaried "management" positions just so they can get away with paying them less while making them work longer hours.

The easiest way to correct this abuse would be to raise the income threshold. The current cap of $455 a week, or $23,660 a year, is below the poverty line for a family of four. Adjusted for inflation, the cap in 1975 was more than twice as high. This meant that most workers were guaranteed overtime pay no matter how their employer chose to describe their work. Today, only 12 percent of workers enjoy this guarantee.

The business community has responded to the president's directive with predictable alarm. Republicans are miffed because he is taking full advantage of his executive powers. Having refused to cooperate with him for the past five years, they now respond with indignation whenever he acts without them. They argue that changes to the overtime rules are at best a distraction from high unemployment, at worst another job-killer. "If you don't have a job, you don't qualify for overtime. So what do you get out of it? You get nothing," said House Speaker John Boehner. "The president's policies are making it difficult for employers to expand employment. And until the president's policies get out of the way, employers are going to continue to sit on their hands."

In fact, more equitable overtime rules are likely to increase employment. As Jared Bernstein, the former chief economist to Vice President Joseph Biden, put it, "If a currently ineligible salaried worker becomes eligible for overtime pay by dint of this change, her employer can easily avoid paying her the overtime premium by hiring a new worker at the 'straight time' wage." Once workers are properly compensated for their extra work, it may be cheaper for employers to hire three people to work forty hours a week than to pay two people to work sixty hours. But however employers respond—by paying better or hiring more—low-income workers will have more money to spend, and higher consumer demand will in turn lead to higher employment. In this case, as in most others, the demands of economic justice align with the conditions for a healthy economy. In a consumer economy like ours, high levels of inequality inhibit growth. As long as the Republicans refuse to acknowledge this, the president will have to go it alone, settling for policies that may slow the trend toward greater income inequality but won't reverse it. Given the scale of the problem, these policies may seem like half-measures, but they're better than nothing—and much better than empty rhetoric. ■

John Garvey

Radical Amazement

WHAT GETS LOST WHEN FAITH IS IDENTIFIED WITH FUNDAMENTALISM

"There is a strong vein of hostility against orthodox religious believers in America today, especially among the young," David Brooks writes in a January 28 *New York Times* column. Young people describe the religious as judgmental, hypocritical, old-fashioned, and out of touch. "It's not surprising," Brooks writes. "There is a yawning gap between the way many believers experience faith and the way that faith is presented to the world." He offers a wonderful quotation from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel: "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement…get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal.... To be spiritual is to be amazed." Brooks quotes Heschel on the oppressive forms of religion that replace faith with creed, worship with discipline, love with habit, and compassion with authority.

Audrey Assad

Brooks then offers the example of the Catholic songwriter Audrey Assad and her evolving faith. Brooks mentions Assad's song "I Shall Not Want," which you can find on YouTube (it's worth a listen). She came from a fundamentalist Protestant family, became Baptist, then Presbyterian, then Catholic, and considered atheism. A serious reading of Augustine and other church fathers led her to where she is. Brooks ends his column with a quote from Augustine about the unending fullness of the experience of God's love.

The responses to this column published in the *Times* letters section a few days later appeared to support Brooks's point about the hostility of so many of our contemporaries to religious belief. All three of the published letters took issue with the column. A couple of them did so with some graciousness, but all three ignored essential elements of what Brooks was getting at.

One letter mentioned what Darwin called "the grandeur in the view of life" that sees "a genetic relative in a blade of grass, a future civilization in the atoms of a dying star, and empathy, passion, and imagination in the biochemical reaction of a network of neurons." Another, equating religion with anti-gay, anti-evolution, and anti-abortion stances, claimed, "We know that the intensity of Augustine's experience is nothing but neurons firing." The third letter brought up suicide bombings, attacks on abortion clinics, anti-scientific thinking, and honor killings. In short, all of the respondents identified religion with fundamentalism of one sort or another.

This equation happened despite the examples Brooks offered. Abraham Joshua Heschel was no fundamentalist and worked with Martin Luther King Jr. to promote civil rights. And among the church fathers Assad might have read as she was studying Christianity is Basil the Great, who wrote, "Whoever says that he knows God has a depraved spirit."

Some conservative writers have said that the culture wars over such issues as same-sex marriage have been lost, and that we all have to move on. Andrew Sullivan, who identifies himself as a conservative gay Catholic, has suggested that one way forward for orthodox Catholics and others who support a traditional approach to marriage and sexuality is for them to concentrate on living countercultural lives that bear witness to the depth of their convictions, a depth he appreciates even if he doesn't share the convictions. I would say something similar with respect to *Humanae Vitae*: One can take issue with much of that document while still appreciating the genuinely prophetic aspects of its understanding that our desire to control every aspect of our lives, in matters ranging from birth to death, has lethal consequences. Whatever one thinks about artificial contraception, one can appreciate the depth of the church's conviction that all of human experience, including sexuality, is richer for being partly beyond our control. As Heschel, puts it, the goal is "radical amazement," "taking nothing for granted," which means taking everything as a gift.

Brooks anticipated some of the criticisms his column received, but his point was not to offer another salvo in the culture war. His point was that the sort of faith exemplified by Heschel—or Buber or Barth or Pascal—ought to interest everyone, not only religious believers. The most profound experience of art, or of worship, or of serious desire, involves us in something that is not limited by our own perception, but opens that perception onto a new and potentially unending dimension. It is a tragedy not to see this. ■

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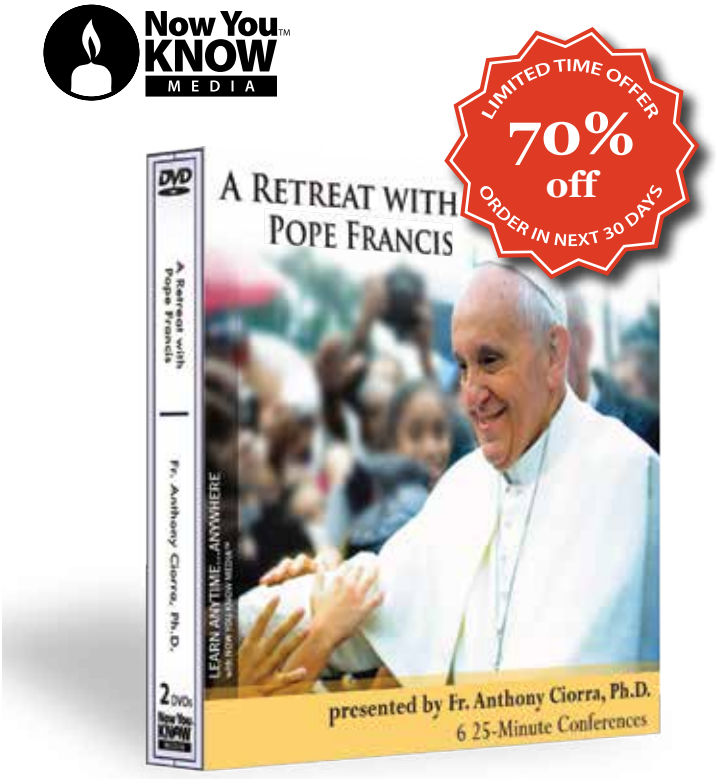

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Paul Horwitz

Same-Sex Marriage & Religious Freedom

A NEW ROUND IN THE OLD DEBATE BETWEEN LIBERTY & EQUALITY

After Arizona Governor Jan Brewer vetoed a bill last month that amended that state's Religious Freedom Restoration Act, onlookers on both sides of the culture wars may have breathed a sigh—of relief or of frustration, depending on which side they were on. I hope they enjoyed it, because the break's over.

The Arizona controversy wasn't the first and it won't be the last. Similar bills are in various stages of development in Mississippi, Georgia, Oklahoma, and elsewhere. Brewer's veto, with its implication that the national and state Republican establishments and business interests would oppose such legislation if it aroused too much negative attention, may tamp down the fires in some states. Elsewhere, it will only stoke them. There are some serious issues here, they are not going away, and they are rarely described accurately. In other words, we are getting yet another master class on how to hold a culture war in America. Here's a short explanation of the issues and a few lessons for combatants and onlookers alike.

In 1990, the Supreme Court changed course after three decades of requiring judicial accommodations for religious burdens caused by general laws. In a case called *Employment Division v. Smith*, it held that neutral, generally applicable laws do not require an accommodation for religious believers who are incidentally burdened by those laws. But it made clear that legislative accommodations for religion *were* acceptable. Congress responded in 1993 with the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), which declared that the government must show a compelling interest when it substantially burdens religious practices, whether the offending law was aimed at those practices or not. Although the Court later ruled that Congress couldn't apply RFRA against the states, many states have passed similar statutes of their own.

Arizona Governor Jan Brewer

PETE SOUZA, OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTOGRAPHER

Many state RFRA cases have involved things like a religious Native American student who invoked the law in the face of a school's demand that he cut his long hair. The burden on the state was high, but it did not always lose. Some accommodations will always be refused in the face of compelling state interests. Religiously motivated child abuse, such as an arranged marriage between a minor and an adult, will still be a crime punishable by law.

Everyone knows what has happened since then: the swift rise of the gay-rights movement, increasingly successful legal and political advances toward same-sex marriage, and dramatic changes in public opinion on these issues—with increasing fervor on the other side of the issue as well, as religious traditionalists and conservatives feel buffeted and disregarded by the surrounding culture. Those views are sincere and understandable. But opposition is encouraged too by political polarization and intra-party pressure on the GOP establishment from the Tea Party, which makes these issues fertile ground for symbolic legislative action. In this environment, one case can be the spark that starts a much larger fire.

The latest spark involves Elane Photography, LLC, a business whose owners refused to photograph a same-sex couple's commitment ceremony and were sued by one of the spouses for violating New Mexico's antidiscrimination law. The company challenged the law on First Amendment grounds and lost, although the state supreme court's decision focused on free speech, not religion. The case grabbed national attention. Against the backdrop of the Supreme Court's recent same-sex marriage decisions and the pending contraceptive-mandate cases, it has sparked the current interest in revising state RFRAs in places like Arizona.

At its most basic, Arizona's proposed law made clear that businesses as well as individuals and churches should receive legislative accommodation for religious practices; it also clarified that the state RFRA would apply as a defense to suits against religious believers by private citizens (like the

spouse in the Elaine Photography case) invoking state or local laws, such as a law requiring equal treatment in places of public accommodation. But, as its defenders pointed out, the legislation did not say who should win such cases. The other side would have to meet the high burden of showing a compelling government interest, but some interests—perhaps including nondiscrimination in the case of businesses broadly catering to the public—might leap that hurdle. Kansas, by contrast, spoke in more absolute terms in its recently proposed legislation. Without allowing for "compelling interest" exceptions, the law would have allowed businesses and others to refuse to provide services that would "solemnize" or "treat as valid" same-sex marriages or unions if that would violate sincerely held religious views. That bill, too, is dead for now. But others will come. And there are a few general lessons we can take from the controversy.

1. Don't read the papers. Anyone who read the Arizona legislation and compared it with the headlines understood that there was some pretty heavy "framing" of the issue going on. The *New York Times*, reporting on Brewer's veto, said the bill "would have given business owners the right to refuse service to gay men, lesbians, and other people on religious grounds." That's like a writer in 1789 saying the proposed free-speech clause of the First Amendment "would allow child pornography." The bill itself, after all, still permitted a compelling government interest to overcome a claim for religious accommodation. Just as not every speaker who makes a free-speech claim wins, so the legislation didn't guarantee victory in any particular case. Legislation like Kansas's was far more lopsided. But here, too, heated rhetoric was the order of the day: the air rang with cries of "Gay Jim Crow." Or, as a headline in *Slate* gently put it, "Kansas's Anti-Gay Segregation Bill Is an Abomination." These laws raise serious concerns about the costs and benefits of religious accommodation, but they deserve more careful reporting and more serious language. Don't trust everything you read or hear.

2. But, um, read the papers. On the other hand, there are reasons to pay attention to the public debate. (I *told* you not to trust everything you read.) For one thing, this is a political and cultural controversy, not just a legal one. Culture wars are as much about symbols as substance. When it suits them, each side in the current debate is happy to argue that its position is innocuous. Supporters of the RFRA amendments argue that allowing religious accommodations won't be as disastrous as their opponents fear; opponents argue that current civil-rights laws still leave plenty of scope for religious choices. Each side says it's the *other* side that's truly dangerous. So we should appreciate that we are fighting a political battle as much as a legal one. The news stories and opinion pieces may exaggerate the legal facts, but they do illuminate a real political debate.

More important, perhaps, is this reason to listen to the arguments we are having, even if they often outstrip the legislative reality: the contending voices in this debate,

including the many thoughtful church-state scholars who have spoken out on each side, are not really arguing about the effects of these laws. Arguably, they are not even debating their *possible* effects. The real debate is over the *logic* of their opponents' positions.

Here, both sides have a point. Whether you call these laws "Gay Jim Crow" or not, the logic of legislative accommodations for individuals, let alone businesses, that object on religious grounds to the application of antidiscrimination laws does indeed pose a serious threat to our civil-rights laws, which are the foundation of a just, egalitarian modern society. It's tough to have a regime of civil rights when every such law carries the footnote "unless you really mind." It's tougher still when those accommodation are triggered by an assertion of "sincere" religious objections, which courts are rightly reluctant to second-guess.

On the other side, the logic of a regime of robust egalitarianism, vigorously backed by law, leaves little room for conscientious religious objection. It tells individuals who want to engage in public and commercial life but have serious religious objections to the new settlement, "Of course there is room for you. Speak, if you must. But don't act." (Sometimes, as the Elane Photography case suggests, that distinction is hard to make.) And it tells them that as long as the law's commands forbid some conduct without *actively* discriminating against religion, those commands are absolute. The title of law-and-religion scholar Steven D. Smith's new book, *The Rise and Decline of American Religious Freedom*, may be premature. Nonetheless, he is right to worry that "traditional religion and contemporary secular egalitarianism are at some deep level fundamentally incompatible."

3. We are arguing about the future as much as the present. The lawyers and law professors who are raising a hue and cry on both sides ought to know that logic is not the length and breadth of the law. In law school, we all read Oliver Wendell Holmes's classic *The Common Law*, the first sentence of which is: "The life of the law has not been logic; it has been experience." Remember that even the "contraceptive mandate" over which we have been arguing so heatedly actually contains multiple exemptions for religious groups; the debate is over whether those exemptions go far enough. Few serious critics of the Arizona RFRA and other such laws think there should be *no* legislative accommodations for religion, although more people are now leaning in that direction. Few defenders of those laws think that religion should *always* trump antidiscrimination laws, although they may struggle to define exactly where the line should be drawn. As a practical matter, gays and lesbians still face substantial societal discrimination and religious individuals and groups still receive substantial legal protection.

The real question is where we are heading. The Elane Photography case, and the legislative efforts it has inspired, are just a snapshot (so to speak) of the larger questions that confront us, as general societal and legal support for gay rights moves from an improbability to a certainty and views change on matters of sexual conduct. Should sincere religious objectors (and what kind—individuals? businesses?) be given some legal shelter from antidiscrimination laws where matters such as contraception, photographing same-sex weddings or issuing same-sex marriage licenses, or providing general services to gays and lesbians are concerned? Or would those accommodations show disrespect for equality—and, by allowing individual "opt-outs" from antidiscrimination law, violate the rule of law itself?

We have been through this debate before, of course. We saw it during the advent of civil rights laws aimed at racial

THE NEW OWNERS

kept the old farm hand. He'd
thumbed enough dirt off potatoes.
Seen hailstones pock the dirt road.
Watched a coyote rip a dog on the trail.
Had keys to the locks, knew
which windows to prop.

The past owner made baseball bats,
the ash billets shipped from Spokane.
The old farm hand
had to wave down the truck
and tip the driver, then carry
the bats, wrapped like bread,
to the basement.

He would eat dinner with the old owners,
but the new family only invited him once.

Squash rolls spread on the kitchen table.
Too much salt in the mushroom soup.

He had pumpkin stuck in his boots
and must have tracked orange
into the house. He picked at the flesh
with the tip of his knife.

The new owners didn't like that
but they would get used to it.
Good help was rare.

—Nick Ripatrazone

Nick Ripatrazone's newest book is The Fine Delight: Postconciliar Catholic Literature *(Cascade Books). He is the author of two books of poetry,* Oblations *and* This Is Not About Birds *(Gold Wake Press).*

discrimination. Then too, there were arguments that freedom of association—and of religion too—should limit those laws' reach. Then as now, one side warned that exemptions would make civil rights a hollow hope, and the other argued that failing to grant them would be the doom of individual autonomy. We mostly take that debate for granted today and assume that the right side won. But that's not because the *legal* answer was unimpeachable. It's because our social values changed, albeit with an assist from the law. Social values concerning the equal dignity and citizenship of gays and lesbians are now changing, even more rapidly than they did on race—and for the better, in my view. If and when they do, the number of people who are even interested in seeking accommodation for their views will diminish, just as today there are (thankfully) few businesses that would publicly seek to exclude black customers even if the law permitted it. Eventually, as gays and lesbians are viewed as full and equal participants in all walks of life, the issue should lose most of its political charge.

But we are still in the middle of that social transformation. And so the legal debate over measures like the proposed laws in Arizona, Kansas, and elsewhere is an effort to frame the future before it happens. Those on one side of the debate are trying to build a bulwark for religious conscientious objection and an ark against changes in surrounding social values. Those on the other side are eager to declare a decisive legal victory and announce preemptively, in effect, that the war over values has *already* been won and the losers should just surrender. The argument is not just about what the law demands in principle, but about what messages our legal choices send in light of our changing culture. One striking example of this is a letter recently issued by some prominent law and religion scholars opposing a proposed amendment to Mississippi's state RFRA. The letter questions whether we should now be passing such laws at all, arguing that whatever value state RFRAs had twenty years ago in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision in *Smith*, today they "will most likely be both seen and used as a shield against enforcement of civil-rights laws (current and future)." Conversely, the current effort by religious traditionalists to pass new RFRA laws can be seen as an expression of fear that the logic of an increasingly pervasive civil-rights regime is, at bottom, antireligious.

So the debate is not just about the constitutionality of the state RFRAs and of accommodations for religion more generally; it is about their social meaning, now and in the future. If the legal claims made by each side seem extravagant—that religious accommodation will kill civil rights, or that a failure to accommodate represents the death of religious freedom—it is because the law is a crude tool for managing social transformation. And legal or philosophical "logic," as opposed to real-world legal practice, is even cruder.

4. Expect compromise and tragedy. Can we take any encouragement from the controversy over the legislative accommodation of religion? Yes, a little. The debate over these laws has been heated, if shallow. On the ground, however, there is still room for compromise. For those of us who support LGBT equality *and* some form of religious accommodation, the death of some of the more unyielding state legislative proposals, often at the hands of establishment Republicans, should be cause for relief, and evidence of a dramatic change in values concerning gay rights. For those who favor much stronger religious accommodations or simply disfavor same-sex marriage and other public recognitions of same-sex dignity, even Governor Brewer's veto might offer some comfort. After all, it demonstrated that we can still have *some* sort of debate about it, however distorted: that people can still argue about whether particular legislative accommodations for religion are necessary or go too far, without treating them as mandatory or impermissible altogether. In its current form, the rule of law favors nondiscrimination and equality, but does not preclude accommodation of sincere religious beliefs.

Some encouragement, then. But not much. Law is supple, but legal principles aren't; values are negotiable, but not infinitely so. There are always tradeoffs; there are always costs, benefits, and losses. Underneath the niceties and technicalities, important as they are, the debate in Arizona and elsewhere over legislative accommodations for religion is still the same old American debate between liberty and equality. We can massage the meaning of both terms, and we can seek compromises between them—up to a point. But can we satisfy both completely? Don't hold your breath. ■

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The Odd Couple

Canonizing John XXIII & John Paul II

John Wilkins

When the Vatican Congregation for the Causes of Saints told Pope Francis that the conditions for the canonization of Pope John Paul II had been met, he asked about Pope John XXIII. His cause was not yet concluded, they replied, because the requisite second miracle had not been approved.

But Pope Francis was not prepared to allow John XXIII to be left behind. He is alleged to have told his friend Cardinal Francesco Marchisano, archbishop of Turin, that if he had been elected in the conclave of 2005, in which he ran second to Joseph Ratzinger, he might have called himself Pope John XXIV. Moreover, in his *Civiltà Cattolica* interview last year, he had quoted Pope John's adoption of the motto "See everything; turn a blind eye to much; correct a little" as a model for his own style of governance.

So he took charge of the rules himself, waived the requirement for a second miracle in John XXIII's case, and will canonize both popes together on April 27, Divine Mercy Sunday (so designated by John Paul).

The Polish church is said to dislike the pairing, fearing that it diminishes the stature of their man. That only goes to show how important it was for Francis to supply balance in the opposite direction. Otherwise the impact would have been dangerously one-sided.

These were two very different popes. John XXIII had a programme of *aggiornamento*, or "updating." The Second Vatican Council he called redefined the church as a pilgrim with all humanity, and brought it out of the "long nineteenth century" when Pius IX repudiated "progress, liberalism, and modern civilization." But John Paul II was seen as bringing in a degree of Restoration—an orientation quickly spotted by the British journalist and historian Paul Johnson, who wrote a book about it. "The Roman Catholic Church is a divine autocracy," he began; he ended: "The holy, Roman, catholic, and apostolic Church...has been sick. It is now recovering its health and energy. John Paul has been its skilled and resolute physician."

How do these two legacies relate to each other?

For one thing, both popes have in common that there was a move to recognize them as saints by acclamation immediately after their deaths, as might have happened in the early church. In the closing stages of the Second Vatican Council, some of the bishops sought this recognition for John XXIII, to seal their work before they went home.

John's successor, Pope Paul VI, had steered the council through to a successful conclusion, but he always saw every side of every question—"my Hamlet," Pope John called him. Ecclesiastical politics decided it. In response to the bishops' call for John's canonization, Pope Paul sought advice from the Vatican's saint-making congregation. In his book *Making Saints*, the former religion editor of *Newsweek* magazine Kenneth L. Woodward recounts how he discussed Paul VI's dilemma with a leading expert at the congregation for saints, the German Jesuit Peter Gumpel. "To put it bluntly," the Jesuit explained, referring to the preliminary stage of beatification that precedes canonization, "if at this moment this pope were to beatify Pius and not John, there would be a certain section of opinion which would say he prefers the line of Pius to that of John. Exactly the opposite would happen if he beatified John instead of Pius."

The upshot was a judgment of Solomon by which Pope Paul linked the cause of John XXIII with that of Pius XII, seeking to counteract the widespread opinion that the former and the council he called had superseded the latter. It is as though Good Pope John, as the world called him, carried such a high charge of ecclesiastical explosive that something had to be done to nullify it.

In a similar way, at the end of John Paul II's funeral in Rome, placards appeared among the huge crowds that read, *santo subito*—"make him a saint at once." The pressure was not unwelcome to the dean of the College of Cardinals, Joseph Ratzinger, who would shortly be elected as John Paul II's successor. In his striking oration during the Requiem Mass in St. Peter's Square, Ratzinger envisaged the late pope "standing today at the window of the Father's house." They could be sure, said Ratzinger, "that he sees us and blesses us," as John Paul had sought to do at the window of the Apostolic Palace on the last Easter Sunday of his life.

For more than twenty-three years Ratzinger had been at John Paul's right hand as prefect of the Vatican Congregation

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Especially when a pope is canonizing his predecessor, one of the virtues prized by the Catholic Church—prudence—needs to operate in overdrive. For this is power praising power.

for the Doctrine of the Faith. As Pope Benedict XVI, he had fewer scruples than Paul VI. He started the sainthood process immediately, setting aside the requirement that five years must first elapse. Such speed shows how much the brake has been eased off. Previously, it was exceptional for popes to be canonized. For centuries only three, as Woodward records in his book, had been named as saints: Celestine V, the holy Benedictine hermit without an administrative clue who at the age of eighty accepted the call from desperate cardinal electors to resolve a deadlocked conclave, only to abdicate after a mere five months (*Il gran rifiuto*, the great refusal, Dante called it); Pius V, who presided over the implementation of the sixteenth-century reforming Council of Trent; and Pius X (1903–14), who wanted progressives to be "beaten with fists." Before Vatican I it was not expected that popes would be saints, for they were, rather, governors, temporal as well as spiritual. It was from the ranks of the religious orders, which had the time and the opportunity and the sponsors, that many candidates for sainthood came. But with the loss of the Papal States as the armies of the Risorgimento unified Italy, popes became quasi-martyrs as "prisoners of the Vatican" and their personal qualities came into focus.

Today there is a papal queue on what Woodward described to me as almost a sainthood assembly line, from Pius IX, who was beatified against all probability by John Paul II in 2000, together with John XXIII—another balancing act—to Pius XII to Paul VI to John Paul I. An assistant postulator for Jesuit sainthood causes, Marc Lindeijer, has recently expressed misgivings about this trend. "I don't think it gives a good image of the Roman Church," he warned, "if every pope canonizes his predecessor. How many saintly popes do you need? One could ask oneself what is the value for the future church of canonizing ten popes in a row?" Moreover, Lindeijer added, once the assembly line is set up and in motion, what will people say if a pope is not canonized? "Oh, he must have done something bad. Why haven't we canonized Pius IX? What did he do wrong? When Benedict dies, if they do not immediately start a process for him, what has he done wrong?"

Especially when a pope is canonizing his predecessor, one of the virtues prized by the Catholic Church—prudence—needs to operate in overdrive. For this is power praising power. The editor of the *Oxford Dictionary of Popes*, Michael Walsh, likes to recall that the English historian Edward Gibbon saw in the Roman pontiffs the ghosts of the Roman emperors. Nowadays, Walsh warns, Gibbon might feel driven to reflect "that popes have adopted the ancient imperial tradition of deifying their ancestors." The Jesuit social scientist and former editor of *America* Thomas J. Reese told me he had a remedy in mind. It should be made obligatory, he suggests, for any pope on assuming his office to write a letter forbidding his successor to open a cause for him.

The controversy surrounding the cause of Pius XII is an object lesson in the advisability of waiting till perspectives have cleared and judgments matured. When he died in 1958, he was regarded as the perfect pope, Pastor Angelicus. Those who met him detected the odor of sanctity. Yet today a fierce dispute is raging about his record during World War II when the Nazis unleashed their program of industrial slaughter against the Jewish people.

That is not to cast a slur on the forthcoming event when the sainthood of the two popes who have stamped their mark on the Catholic Church during the past fifty years is recognized and proclaimed. "These two were wonderful, both of them," said Pope Francis, announcing the joint canonization.

Humility has been identified as one of the signs of sanctity in a pope. Here is a key to Pope John. On his eightieth birthday, he greeted a group from his village of Sotto il Monte who, dressed in the traditional peasant black, had arrived in Rome for the celebration. Ignoring the serried ranks of cardinals in their finery, Pope John went over to them.

"What I would really like," he told them, "would be to go to our local restaurant with you all and eat pasta and drink wine and talk about old times. But we have to do the Lord's will."

While John XXIII's family was always dear to him, John Paul II had some of the characteristics of an orphan. His mother died when he was eight, his father when he was twenty. When his elder brother, a doctor, died at the age of twenty-six of scarlet fever contracted in the hospital, in agony of mind he kept asking why. So did others. "It was God's will," said the young Karol Wojtyla, after the death.

He consulted many, heard few, and decided alone. A witness to his character is his admirer the Polish-American philosopher Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, who labored with him for four years to bring his book *The Acting Person*, combining phenomenology and Thomism, to the English-language press. In their study of John Paul, *His Holiness*, Carl Bernstein and Marco Politi, who interviewed Tymieniecka, report her impressions of the future pope. "People around him see the sweetest, most modest person. They never see this iron will behind it.... He's extremely proud. This is an extremely multifaceted human being, extremely colorful. He is by no means as humble as he appears.

Neither is he modest. He thinks about himself very highly, very adequately."

Both popes brought about revolutions, John XXIII in the church, John Paul II in the world. When John called a council, he was asked why it was needed, since popes were infallible now. The story is that he went over to a window in his study and flung it open: The church needed fresh air.

His opening speech to the assembled bishops was, as so often with Pope John, couched in winningly simple terms, but with depths underneath. It took even experienced commentators some time to appreciate that he was setting the entire proceedings on a new course. Every day, he told the assembled bishops, he had to listen "to voices of persons who, though burning with zeal, are not endowed with too much sense of discretion or measure. In these modern times they can see nothing but prevarication and ruin.... We feel we must disagree with those prophets of doom."

Later in the speech he turned to the purpose of the council itself, which was to be pastoral, updating the application of traditional doctrine rather than repeating it. "The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another." By the time the conciliar bishops had finished their work, four years later, they had carried out, in accordance with Pope John's wish, a radical updating.

John Paul II's revolution started at once. His 1978 inaugural sermon in St. Peter's Square electrified Eastern Europeans, who, watching it on television and hearing it on radio, could discern what it portended, and it emboldened some evangelical pastors daunted by secular culture in the West as they sought to proclaim Jesus Christ. John Paul II showed them how. "Open wide the doors for Christ!" he exhorted. "To his saving power open the boundaries of states, economic and political systems, the vast fields of culture, civilization, and development!

"Do not be afraid! Christ knows what is in man. He alone knows it."

A climax was to come shortly in Poland, when for the first time their pope returned home. On the eve of Pentecost 1979, a million people crowded into central Warsaw to greet him. In Victory Square stood a cross 60 feet high, erected for the occasion. Robed for the Mass, John Paul commanded the scene, vigorous, handsome, an athlete, poet, and mystic, confident, recollected. He said nothing directly against Communist dogma in his sermon. He did not need to. "Come down, Holy Spirit!" he prayed. "Come down, renew the face of the earth—the face of *this* earth!" The Polish word for earth means also "land." Everyone understood.

He was the liberator, inspirer of a revolution that unfolded on that day without a window being broken. The Catholics took charge of everything to do with the celebration, reduc-

Pope John XXIII

ing the government apparatchiks to bystanders watching the proceedings from their offices on television. He showed them as they were: authorities without any more substance than cardboard cutouts.

His many fans called him John Paul the Great. Throughout his papacy, even as Parkinson's disease took an increasing toll, he continued to bestride the world like a colossus. As late as 2003 he was a force to contend with as he made clear his outright opposition to George W. Bush's Iraq war.

His commitment to John XXIII's great achievement, the council, in which he had participated as the archbishop of Krakow, always had a certain ambivalence. At the time, the Polish bishops were disconcerted to find open debate and dispute being engaged in on the floor of St. Peter's, reported prominently in the press—just what they avoided in Poland, where the church had to show itself to be unified against the Communist rulers. As the council made its way toward what was to be hailed as a jewel in its crown, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, two Polish groups submitted alternative draft texts. One group was apparently led by Archbishop Wojtyla. But these drafts were very far away from the approach the bishops finally agreed on, and were set aside. The Wojtyla group thought the emerging *Gaudium et Spes* document was too optimistic and reflected too much the Western standpoint of its protagonists. In the end the constitution was accepted with widespread support and the Polish bishops went along with it.

As pope, John Paul repeated that the Second Vatican Council was a sure compass for the future and the reference point for all his pastoral activity. And he was indeed a product of the council. Without *Gaudium et Spes* and associated conciliar decrees, he could not have made justice and peace, religious freedom and freedom of conscience the platform of his preaching to the world during his visits to so many countries in five continents. Nor without the council could he have entered the synagogue in Rome or the mosque in Damascus. He could not have called together representatives of the world's religions to pray for peace in Assisi. Nor could he have launched his project of a new Christian humanism.

On the other hand, so dominant a pope was bound to hollow out the council's key structural reform, collegiality—that the church was governed by the college of bishops, with and under the pope, not by pope and Roman Curia. The bishops envisaged nothing less than the replacing of the papal absolute monarchy stretching back to the eleventh century by a model nearer to the biblical image of Peter and the Eleven. But John Paul shored up the opinions of those who saw in centralization the Catholic Church's greatest strength, and who believed that without it, he could not have shaken the Soviet Union in the way he did.

Accordingly, under John Paul, collegiality meant "the shared unanimous position" of the bishops round their leader, as he put it in his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*. The council had failed to supply any institutional underpinning for the doctrine, which could not flourish in a church dominated by the man in white. His face was the face of the church and television had eyes only for him. So long as John Paul was pope, the bishops had only walk-on parts. "They treat us like altar boys here," said the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, archbishop of Chicago, during a stay in Rome.

By contrast, John trusted the bishops. He watched the council on closed-circuit television. "Now they are beginning to understand," he remarked at one point. He intervened hardly at all in the conciliar proceedings, though decisively. Where John Paul was respected and admired with something like awe, Pope John was loved. His goodness and wisdom took the world by storm. Anyone could see in him the fisherman, Peter, throwing out his nets.

His path to the papacy was against the odds. Whereas Karol Wojtyla's qualities brought him steady recognition—he became Poland's youngest bishop in 1958 at the age of thirty-eight—Angelo Roncalli had to bear slights. He knew that the Vatican did not rate him highly. As diplomatic representative of the Holy See, he was relegated to Bulgaria and Turkey. His faithful aide, Loris Capovilla, now created a cardinal by Pope Francis, draws attention to an entry in Roncalli's spiritual diary for 1926. He had been a bishop for twenty months. "As was easily foreseeable," the future pope wrote, episcopal office "has brought me much worry and anxiety. But it is odd that the worry was not caused by the Bulgarians, for whom I am here, but by the church's

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central administration. I have been insulted and humiliated in a way that I didn't expect, and that has hurt me deeply. Lord, you know everything!"

His faith and devotion to his task never wavered, however, and an unexpected break brought him back to Europe. In Paris in 1944, after the German occupiers had been driven out, General de Gaulle wanted a new nuncio to replace Valerio Valeri, whom he rejected as having been too close to Pétain's collaborationist regime. None of the Vatican's nominations prospered. So Roncalli was chosen. Summoned to Rome on his way to Paris, he expressed his surprise. "I don't understand it," he said to the secretary of state, Domenico Tardini. Nor do I, agreed Tardini.

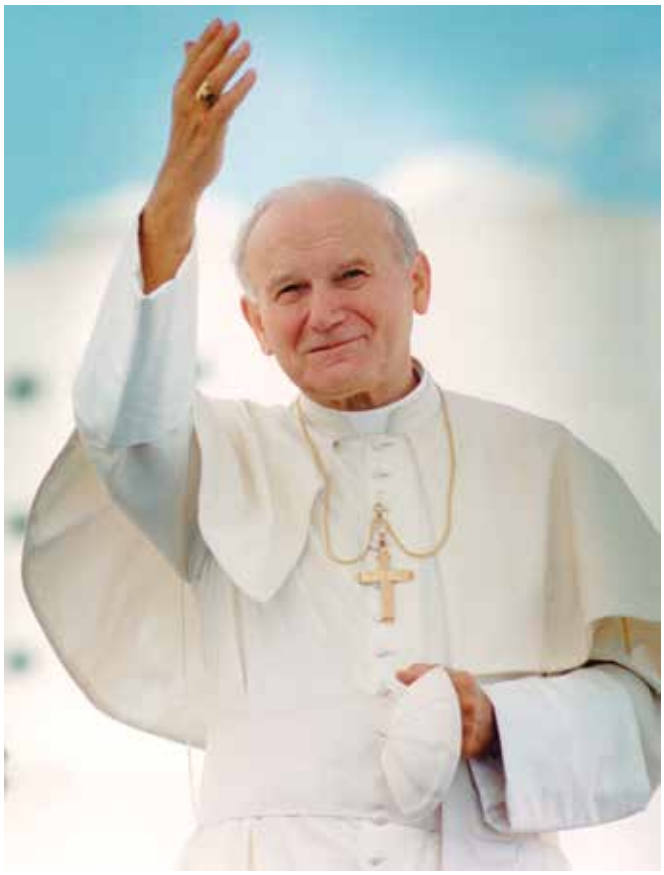
He was elected pope as a caretaker, though no one had any idea that he would take his care of the church as far as he did. Loris Capovilla treasures some words spoken to him by Pope John in his last days. "We worked together," John recalled gratefully, "and we suffered together. We served and often had to swallow bitter medicine—but that didn't stop us. We refused to waste our time picking up the stones that had been hurled at us in order to throw them back. We were patient, forgave people and we loved."

Nor did the cardinals who elected Pope John Paul II foresee the future. They wanted a strong man, and in that they succeeded, but as to the rest, that is another matter. As John Paul himself once confided to journalists in a press conference held on the papal plane, "I don't think the eminent cardinals knew what sort of personality I am, and therefore what kind of papacy they were getting."

Saints can be hard to live with, because they do not compromise. John Paul could be harsh. Presiding over meetings of bishops, his arms resting on the arms of his chair, his knuckles would whiten with tension when he disagreed with what was being said. And after the fall of the Communist empire, he became angry with the Western democracies, opposing the pluralism that their societies were trying to build. What was this freedom that Europeans were touting, he asked on his fourth Polish visit in 1991. "Freedom to abort unborn children?" Poland was being urged to "enter Europe" but "we helped to create Europe in the first place." He was shouting. His 1993 encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor*, asserting absolute values and tight ethical norms, made a big impact, though some moral theologians despaired.

Certainly, a lingering dark cloud over John Paul II's papacy is the inadequacy of his reaction to the horrific revelations of clerical sexual abuse that erupted on his watch. He could not get his mind round them. For one who lived out his priesthood with such integrity and heroism, it was hardly thinkable that some others did not, or that young people could be at risk where they should have been most safe. Probably also his experience in Poland, where crises of this sort would have been taken as calculated provocations by the authorities, exerted background influence on him.

If the function of Devil's Advocate still existed—it was abolished by John Paul II in 1983 as part of a revision of the



Pope John Paul II

CNS PHOTO / JOE RINKUS JR.

canonization procedure—this would be the area on which he would be most likely to concentrate. To the very end John Paul supported Marcial Maciel Degollado, the Mexican-born founder of the Legionaries of Christ, despite all the evidence again him. At the height of the press furor over abuse in the United States, in 2002, he was slow to act. It was three months before he called the American cardinals to Rome. On Holy Thursday that year, in his customary letter to priests, he referred to "the mystery of iniquity" at work in the world, a phrase from St. Paul's Second Letter to the Thessalonians that speaks of "the wicked one" whom Jesus will slay with the breath of his mouth at the end of time. But that is not an explanation, let alone a remedy.

Drama attended the deaths of both popes. In 2005 it became clear that John Paul's long fight against Parkinson's disease could not be prolonged much further. Some speculated about resignation, as his successor was to do and as canon law allows, but he ruled it out. Christ did not come down from his cross, he said. He went to the hospital, came back; went again to the hospital, where a tracheotomy was performed, came back. The operation on his throat made it impossible for him to speak, even when he tried to say words of blessing from his window on Easter Sunday to the crowds below. As he neared his death after twenty-six years in the

ADORATIONS

Adoration of the Magi from the Life of the Virgin: Dürer

A noisy scene:
Angel trio in the heavens
warbling and strumming,
two magi volubly disputing,
Joseph itching to join in,
and in the upper left
the star a firework
bursting into bloom.
But look below:
mother and child
lapped in silence.

Adoration of the Magi: Cristofano di Michele Martini Robetta

The sky is racked with scouring winds.
No one rejoices,
not the trumpeting angels
not the crowding courtiers
not Joseph, old and defeated
fixing his wife with a querulous look
which Mary will not answer
while the baby exchanges baleful glances with a bull.
Only two foreground figures seem happy.
Magi? Donors?
Foreigners for sure,
aware only of the child
and not of the natives,
not of the natives, and what they will do.

Adoration of the Child with a Portrait of the Donor: Lombard School

The cattle nose in, mildly interested.
Joseph leans on his staff,
in arthritic pain, perhaps, or grief.
Mary, in pink, is restored as a virgin,
waist girt tight, pale hands full of grace.
We don't know where the donor is looking
but it is not at the baby lying naked on the ground,
Mary's dark cloak spread beneath him,
his halo barely glistening, streaked with thorns.

—Diane Vreuls

Diane Vreuls has published a novel, a children's book, a collection of short stories, and a book of poems. She lives in Oberlin, Ohio.

chair of Peter, the world caught its breath. A superstar was leaving them.

In Britain I wondered if my country could any longer be fairly described as Anglican and Protestant, for, day after day, it was John Paul's fatally deteriorating health that topped the news agendas of broadcast and print media alike. The funeral in Rome was viewed by an estimated 2 billion people worldwide, and attended by hundreds of thousands of pilgrims and two hundred heads of state and other dignitaries, including the archbishop of Canterbury, who had let it be known that if he had to choose, he would go to Rome rather than officiate at the wedding of the Prince of Wales. The prince postponed his nuptials and went too.

Where John Paul's papacy was one of the longest in history, John had only four and a half years in St. Peter's chair. "I know," he told the Belgian Primate, Leo Joseph Suenens, during a conversation at the papal summer residence in Castel Gandolfo, "what my personal part in the preparation of the council will be.... It will be suffering."

In his last days, as he succumbed to stomach cancer, he drew attention to the ivory crucifix opposite his bed. "Those open arms have been the program of my pontificate," he said. "They say that Christ died for all, for all.... Souls! Souls! *Ut unum sint! Ut unum sint!*"—"That they may all be one," the words of Jesus after the Last Supper. At length his doctor told him the end was near. "I am ready," he replied. He had always said that his bags were packed and he could go at any time.

Now both popes are to be raised to the universal calendar of saints. But they leave behind serious division in the church. Those who favor change are in contention with those who favor continuity, and who sometimes speak as though the church had never changed at all.

Upheaval is the rule rather than the exception when church councils are called, and in the wake of Vatican II there has been plenty of it. In a trenchant footnote in his magisterial *An Introduction to the New Testament*, the biblical exegete Raymond Brown deplored the Catholic civil war. Before the council, he observed, Catholics in their prayers "rarely mentioned non-Christians, or even non-Catholics, who suffered from disasters or political persecution; after the council they have done so with great earnestness." On the other hand, he went on, "before that council they rarely if ever attacked fellow Roman Catholics publicly; afterwards they have done so both vociferously and publicly, as they have fought over liberal and conservative issues." Then Brown posed a pointed question. "Can they be persuasive in their concern for outsiders if they virtually hate one another?"

Pope Francis has set himself to change this climate. If wrongly received, the canonizations could make it worse. Can Francis use the occasion, instead, to build a bridge between the two wings? If so, with Pope-emeritus Benedict probably in attendance, he needs to do a few miracles of his own. Every word that he will say on April 27, when vast crowds are expected in Rome, will count. ■

Richard Alleva

Treacle

'SON OF GOD'

The evangelistic fervor of producers Mark Burnett and Roma Downey and director Christopher Spencer is evident throughout *Son of God*, the culmination of their very popular History Channel miniseries *The Bible*. But, alas, so bombastic is the filmmaking, so lacking in nuance, freshness of approach, and richness of characterization, that I felt I had been clamped to my theater seat by a muscular, stentorian preacher who could only bellow passages from the Gospel of John (the script's main source, though not to the exclusion of the other three accounts), while never once persuading or moving me. At the same time, there is also a certain insecurity detectable in the movie. *Son of God* has the dubious distinction of being both headlong and wavering, one-dimensional yet somewhat dodgy in its adaptation of a testament that is usually lucid, sometimes mysterious, but always vibrant.

Most of the familiar passages are on the screen but feel truncated. Director Spencer seems to have taken to heart the old Hollywood dictum "Cut to the chase," so that every scene begins near its climax without the buildup that would make it more effective. For instance, in the Lazarus episode (John 11), the text tells us that the dead man's sister reproached Jesus for not arriving in time to cure her brother, and the Lord "raged at his own spirit and harrowed himself" (in Richmond Lattimore's translation). How moving, how utterly human, and yet how puzzling for the Son of God, with celestial powers at his instant command, to take time to torment himself at the death of a friend. And what a marvelous challenge for the actor. But in this movie, Christ hears the bad news and—cut—we're at the tomb and—presto!—Lazarus is raised. I'm not reproaching the filmmakers for excluding my favorite moments; it's just

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He felt the power go out from his hair.

that their storytelling is so precipitous it robs the drama of oxygen.

Camerawork and editing reinforce the lack of subtlety. Though the Moroccan locations should have worked well, with harsh, rocky hillsides serving as counterpoint to the preachments of love, they serve little purpose in a film that relies on a virtually unending and unvaried succession of close-ups. Instead of choreographing the crowd scenes, the director simply gives us screaming, sweating, or swooning faces. In indoor scenes, the predominance of close-ups leads to confusion when we can't tell where the actors are standing in relation to one another. And the Crucifixion is robbed of its power when the camera is positioned so close to Christ's face that the imagery becomes more dental than dramatic. To be sure, Carl Dreyer filmed his great *The Passion of Joan of Arc* mainly in close-up, too, but his tact and skill made the result a transcendent experience, not visual hyperventilation.

Maybe the concentration on faces was intended to avoid emphasis on bodily gore, in contrast to the excesses of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. Yet the writers have added moments of bloodshed that don't exist in the gospels. There is a scene of Pilate practicing his swordplay with a gladiator and then slashing the disarmed man's face. (A fine way to treat one's personal trainer!) We also see Simon Peter bashed about by Caiaphas's guards after he denies Jesus, when it would be much more moving to have an unscathed Peter quietly realize his faithlessness and—as Matthew has it—go out and "weep bitterly."

It's not only Mel Gibson's violence that *Son of God* tries to steer away from, but also the charge of anti-Semitism his movie attracted. Co-producer and actress Roma Downey (her portrayal of the Virgin Mary, along with Greg Hicks's Pilate, provides the only satisfactory acting) has spoken convincingly in radio interviews of her intent not to offend non-Christians, but the inclusion of Christ's arrest and trial by the high priests (and how can those scenes be omitted?) makes controversy just about unavoidable in a post-Holocaust era.

The filmmakers have resorted to certain stratagems: Caiaphas's prosecutions of Christ are here countered by the compassionate Nicodemus, and the actor playing Caiaphas comes across less as a genuine enemy than as a high-school principal sincerely disturbed by a misbehaving student. But the script's main solution to the anti-Semitic problem is to emphasize Caiaphas's understandable fear of Roman intolerance of any social disorder. Consequently, the prosecution of Christ is seen as forgivable appeasement, not sectarian vindictiveness. However, this approach doesn't quite work. Cruel as Pilate may be (witness that slashed gladiator), his cruelty is beside the point when it comes to the fate of Christ as shown in this movie. Following the gospel, the script has the governor reluctantly pronouncing his verdict only after he has questioned the priests about the need to do so.

Similarly, since the figure of Judas has been inflated by anti-Semites into a vile archetype of the eternally treacherous Jew, the moviemakers try to rationalize his betrayal by showing him genuinely concerned that Jesus is going too far in proclaiming his mission in Jerusalem at a dangerous time, the Passover. This would make Judas more of a moderate than a traitor. But when Caiaphas is planning the arrest of Jesus and needs Judas's help, the apostle asks greedily, "What's in it for me?" and is rewarded with the thirty pieces of silver. What are we to make of this schizoid character? The filmmakers want to adhere strictly to the words of the gospel, but they don't want to offend modern sensibilities. I sympathize with them in their dilemma, but their solutions come across as incoherent compromises rather than as humane dramatization. They would have had to radically reconceive the characters of Caiaphas, Pilate, and Judas to avoid both bigotry and dramatic inconsistency, and they just weren't up to the task. It is precisely this inadequacy of imagination that introduces an element of uneasiness into a movie that is otherwise so loud and abrasively one-dimensional.

However, one would never label Diogo Morgado's performance in the title role as loud or abrasive, though it is one-dimensional. Has there ever been such a laid-back embodiment of the preacher whose words and presence changed the course of history? This is a Jesus who couldn't puff past the second row of the crowd gathered at the Mount. His is a voice that coats the eloquence of the ages with marzipan. When Morgado's Christ pronounces the terrifying forecast of a Jerusalem "not one of whose stones will be left standing," he is playfully poking the belly of a child to make him laugh. That moment is typical of a movie that turns the power of the gospels into the worst sort of Sunday-school treacle, and renders its multifaceted hero as a New Age guru, serenely smiling and insufferably groovy. ■

Celia Wren

Cold Case

'FARGO' ON FX

"Some roads you shouldn't go down," a creepily self-assured hoodlum says in the pilot for FX's limited series *Fargo*. Gazing with almost hypnotic calm at the cop who has pulled his car over on an icy street, the desperado (played by Billy Bob Thornton) goes on, "Maps used to say, 'There be dragons here.' Now they don't. But that doesn't mean the dragons aren't there."

Latter-day Smaugs might not have troubled the creators of *Fargo*, but that doesn't mean the path to the show—premiering April 15—wasn't potentially hazardous. The ten-episode series takes inspiration from the revered 1996 Coen brothers movie of the same title, which won two Academy Awards, including one for original screenplay. FX's version features a new crime story and new characters—including a hapless insurance agent played by Martin Freeman—but it revels in the same wintry environment, populated by amiable Minnesotans who say "yah" a lot. And it seems to strive to fuse kooky humor and grisly tension as audaciously as the film did.

That tonal balancing act is tough to pull off, and risk-averse TV executives might have thought twice before developing a show that begs to be compared to an acclaimed movie. Some hesitation might have been justified: judging by a version of the pilot episode made available to reviewers, FX's *Fargo* has some flaws. The darker plot twists seem hurried and lurching. The gentle mockery of folksy Midwestern speech patterns seems too easy; the utterances of Thornton's gangster are too gnomic. And, at least in the pilot, there's no character as vibrant and quirky as Marge Gunderson, the relentlessly cheerful and capable pregnant detective that Frances McDormand played in the movie.

Still, with ample suspense and atmosphere, the show will appeal to crime-caper addicts and anyone who wants more of the movie's ready-for-ice-fishing-you-betcha vibe. (Noah Hawley wrote the series; the executive producers include Joel and Ethan Coen.) As one might expect in our era—which some are calling a second Golden Age of television—the photography is satisfyingly cinematic. So, for that matter, is the sound: in one transition, the labored breathing of a dying deer segues into the rattle of a broken washing machine in an unhappy household.

Freeman nails his character, the nebbishy insurance salesman Lester Nygaard, who makes Willy Loman look like Julius Caesar. Clumsy and frequently tongue-tied, with circles under his wary eyes, Lester manages to bungle both his personal and professional lives. "What happens if you have an accident at your job?" he demands desperately of a potential life-insurance customer who has visited Lester's office. "I work at the library," the prospect replies.

In a turn of events reminiscent of Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train*, or even the first season of *Breaking Bad*, Lester's frustrated Everyman suddenly finds himself plunged into a chilling criminal world. Here, he has to negotiate a relationship with Lorne Malvo (Thornton), a scary loner with an amoral worldview. "Your problem is, you spent your whole life thinking there are rules. There aren't," Lorne tells a panicked Lester.

CHRIS LARGE / FX

Billy Bob Thornton as Lorne Malvo

Of course, there are rules for the story's law enforcement characters, who include Deputy Bill Oswalt (Bob Odenkirk of *Breaking Bad*) and Deputy Molly Solverson (Allison Tolman, whose stolid, determined character recalls Marge Gunderson). Colin Hanks plays Deputy Gus Grimly, a Duluth policeman who, as a single dad on the beat, stays in touch with his kid via walkie-talkie. ("You brush your teeth? Over.")

Another dominant presence in the story is the frigid Minnesota environment: the frozen fields stretching out on either side of the highways; the heaps of snow edging the sidewalk; the cold that fogs the characters' breath when they talk outdoors in their heavy coats and hats with earflaps. The pilot episode dwells so lovingly on the weather conditions that you begin to think the prospect of revisiting the film's setting—which must seem exotic to VIPs in America's bicoastal-based film and television industry—was additional motivation for the series.

A previous effort to adapt *Fargo* for television, with Edie Falco as Marge Gunderson, collapsed after the filming of a pilot, which was eventually screened as a one-off in 2003. That ill-fated venture didn't scare off the creators of this new version, who seem to have carefully considered the ramifications of throwing caution to the wind. More than once in the first FX episode, the camera lingers on a poster in Lester's basement. Showing a school of swimming fish, and one contrarian fish heading in the opposite direction, the poster reads: "What if you're right and they're wrong?" ■

George Scialabba

Who Decides?

The Great Debate
Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and the Birth of Right and Left
Yuval Levin
Basic Books, $27.99, 275 pp.

In the mid-seventeenth century, to think for oneself and determine one's fate were the prerogatives of a tiny hereditary elite. The rest of humanity did not even aspire to them. By the mid-nineteenth century, the aspiration, at least, was near universal in Europe and North America, and beginning to be felt elsewhere; and reality had begun, gradually, fitfully, and still incompletely, to shift in that direction everywhere. The arc of history had been bent toward democracy.

What accomplished that most momentous of alterations was, of course, the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was not a doctrine, or a set of doctrines; it was an attitude. The best definition remains Kant's in his essay "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" (1784):

> Enlightenment is humankind's emergence from its self-imposed immaturity.... This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in a lack of understanding but in a lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. "*Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your own understanding!"—that is the motto of enlightenment.

Or, as the New Left of the 1960s and '70s put it: "Question authority!"

Why, one may ask, did it take courage in the late eighteenth century to use one's own understanding? Because the prevailing structures of power and privilege were mostly arbitrary and patently unjust. The beneficiaries of this state of affairs discouraged critical reflection on it, by indoctrination and the threat of punishment. Where authority has no justification, to ask for one is sedition.

Some, probably most, of those who opposed self-determination cared only about preserving their privileges. But others have always believed, more or less sincerely, that freedom is too great a burden for ordinary people and that governing is beyond their capacity. Even to choose their rulers or their form of government is too much for them. On these subjects they must not, for their own good, "use their understanding without guidance" from wiser others.

The revolutions in America and France were the first large-scale assertions of popular sovereignty, and they gave rise to a great debate on the question of self-determination. It was a somewhat lopsided debate; the opponents of popular sovereignty mainly replied with force rather than with arguments. Only one thinker of stature tried to rebut the advocates of self-determination (though he too called for forcibly suppressing them): Edmund Burke. In *The Great Debate*, Yuval Levin, editor of *National Affairs* and a frequent contributor to the *Weekly Standard* and *National Review*, reconstructs the supreme agon of that controversy—Burke's angry *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and Thomas Paine's incandescent reply, *The Rights of Man*.

Burke was Anglo-Irish, the private secretary (we would now say chief of staff) of a leading Whig politician, and eventually a member of Parliament. The Whigs favored limiting the prerogatives of royalty in favor of those of aristocracy. They were (or claimed to be) something of a "good government" party, not so egregiously corrupt, cruel, or tyrannical as the Tories; and Burke made a reputation early on as an opponent of some of the more flagrant abuses of the time, including the criminal-justice system, religious discrimination, the administration of Ireland, and the plundering of the colonies, particularly India and America.

But as a dangerous radical observed in our own time, it is one thing to give food to the poor and quite another thing

Detail of Thomas Paine *by Auguste Millière circa 1876*

to ask why the poor have no food. Burke was willing to acknowledge abuses and mitigate them, but he rejected all talk of structural injustice, equal rights, or radical reform. Paine (and Burke's other contemporary critics, Joseph Priestley, Mary Wollstonecraft, James Mackintosh, and William Godwin) scoffed that Burke's defense of the status quo (the "British constitution," he called it reverently) was a tissue of fallacies, sophistries, and evasions, camouflaged by gorgeous rhetoric. This might have been posterity's verdict as well, if the French Revolution had turned out differently. But the Terror and Napoleon's dictatorship appeared to vindicate Burke. An alliance of counterrevolutionary powers, led (as Burke had urged) by England, defeated France militarily, and the controversy subsided. In the latter half of the twentieth century, the Cold War roused American conservatism from its long intellectual slumber. Interest in Burke revived. The Great Debate is still hardly a burning, or even a smoldering, issue for most twenty-first-century Americans. But Levin's good-tempered, even-handed book will no doubt persuade many readers of its continuing relevance.

"Burke and Paine," Levin writes, "each offer a coherent and, for the most part, internally consistent case about the character of society and politics." He summarizes their opposing cases very handily:

> Burke's objection to total revolution draws on his horror at the prospect of abandoning all that has been arduously gained over centuries of slow, incremental reform and improvement. He sees it as a betrayal of the trust of past generations and of the obligation to future ones. Paine's objection to such plodding reform, meanwhile, is that it gives credence to despotism and is motivated more by the desire to sustain inequity than to address injustice.
>
> Burke believes that human nature and the rest of nature make themselves known in politics through long experience, that human beings are born into a web of obligations, and that the social problems we confront do not lend themselves to detached scientific analysis. For all these reasons, he believes that improvements in politics must be achieved by cumulative reform—by building on success to address failure and by containing the effects of innovation within a broader context of continuity.
>
> Paine, on the other hand, believes that nature reveals itself in the form of abstract principles discovered by rational analysis, that human beings are entitled to choose their government freely, that government in turn exists to protect their other choices, and that reason can help people see beyond the superstitions that have long sustained unjust regimes. For all these reasons, he believes that improvements in politics must be achieved by thoroughgoing revolution—by throwing off the accumulated burdens of the past and starting fresh and properly.

This sounds plausible enough. It is certainly the standard account of the Great Debate. But look at those alternatives a little more closely. On the one hand, Paine champions "rational analysis"; on the other, Burke insists that we learn from "long experience." Paine declares that "human beings are entitled to choose their government freely"; Burke counters that "human beings are born into a web of obligations." Paine advocates "throwing off the accumulated burdens of the past"; Burke emphasizes "building on success to address failure."

In each case, the second half of the antithesis is supposed to be incompatible with the first. But in each case, it is no such thing. Every judgment involves *both* rational analysis and the lessons of experience. Why would those who are born into a web of obligations (i.e., everyone) not be entitled to choose their government freely? Why is it impossible to distinguish between past failures and past successes, rejecting the former and building on the latter? Burke's polemical method consists of attributing extreme and implausible positions to his ideological opponents and then refuting them with many expressions of outraged common sense. Enlightenment "radicalism" simply proposed that no tradition or institution be exempt from criticism and that all men and women should have a fair chance to shape the common life. For Burke, this was sheer horror, the world turned upside down. He could not imagine that most human beings would ever attain maturity.

The profound philosophical differences Levin attributes to Burke and Paine are actually superficial ones. Whether reform should be partial or radical, gradual or rapid; whether our ancestors were wise or foolish and whether the laws they bequeathed us are just or unjust; whether governing well is easy or difficult and whether most people will be capable of, or interested in, taking part in it; whether we are influenced chiefly by reasons or passions, abstractions or facts, inherited loyalties or ethical reflection: these questions are all beside the main point at issue between Burke and Paine. The main point is: Who decides? Shall ordinary men and women be empowered? Does each of us get an equal vote and a chance to be heard? Paine says yes; Burke tries desperately to confuse matters, setting off huge smoke bombs of rhetorical obfuscation, proceeding from trivially obvious premises to outlandish conclusions by way of grandiloquent non sequiturs.

Because an institution or practice has lasted a long time, Burke argues, it deserves to continue. Because none of us can be perfectly objective or impartial, we cannot reason together about fundamentals. Wanting to discuss everything is the same as wanting to abolish everything. Spreading new ideas by persuasion is no different from imposing them by armed conquest. Because variety is a good thing, vast inequalities of wealth and status are desirable. Because inherited privilege bestows special opportunities to become wise and public-spirited, the rest of us can safely assume that the privileged are wise and public-spirited. Because some aspects of our identity are not chosen but given at birth, it follows that, as Jefferson put it with scathing sarcasm, "the mass of mankind have…been born with saddles on their backs, [and] a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God." Stripped of Burkean rodomontade, all these arguments are preposterous. Dressed in it, they have bedazzled generations of conservatives, including Levin.

In the book's concluding chapter, Levin argues, again plausibly enough, for the enduring relevance of the Great Debate. Nowadays, he observes, we all believe, as the Founding Fathers did, in liberty, equality, and innovation. But we also believe, as they did, in order, continuity, and compromise. We believe in strong government but also in limited government, in expertise but also in tradition. We are all liberals, he maintains, though some of us are progressive, Paine-ite liberals and others are conservative, Burkean liberals.

It is a neat, ingenious, even magnanimous argument. Though he himself is a down-the-line Republican, Levin seems genuinely concerned to avoid the appearance of partisanship—he goes so far as to refrain from naming the two major present-day political parties. He sincerely believes that a better appreciation of intellectual history will introduce more comity into contemporary American politics.

But just as Levin exaggerates the importance of philosophical differences in the Great Debate, he exaggerates the importance of the Great Debate to contemporary politics. Today, at any rate, the differences between left and right are not chiefly philosophical; they are cruder, more elemental than that. America is a plutocracy. The degree to which popular preferences influence government policy is minimal. (Recently a Princeton political scientist estimated that the opinions of the bottom 70 percent of the income scale exercise no influence on policy, and those of the next 29 percent not much. That sounds about right.) Progressive versus conservative is one way of describing the difference between the two major parties, but moderate plutocrats versus extreme plutocrats is far more accurate. What divides the 1 percent from the 99 percent is not a different brand of liberalism.

In reality, the Great Debate ended not long after it began. Within forty years, the Reform Act expanded the suffrage in England. Within a century, adult-male suffrage was universal in Europe. Within two centuries, adult

suffrage was universal. As a source of political legitimacy, heredity now ranks somewhere below astrology. The principle of one person/one vote (in practice, alas, one dollar or Euro or ruble/one vote) is as widely accepted as the right to choose one's profession or religion or mate. As for prescription, prejudice, inherited status, and the rest of Burke's fancied "British constitution"—gone and good riddance.

Before the Enlightenment—before even Burke's Glorious (not all *that* glorious) Revolution—the democratic truths that Paine and others vindicated against Burke were memorably asserted by the humble against the haughty. In the Putney Debates of 1647, some of Cromwell's soldiers perceived that their betrayal by the country's large landowners was imminent and spoke out, no less eloquently than Burke. Edward Sexby: "There are many thousands of us soldiers that have ventured our lives…. But it seems now that except a man hath a fixed estate in this kingdom, he hath no right in it. I wonder that we were so much deceived." John Wildman: "It is the end of Parliament to legislate according to the just ends of government, not simply to maintain what is already established. Every person in England hath as clear a right to elect his Representative as the greatest person in England… [for] all government is in the free choice of the people." Thomas Rainsborough: "The poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the greatest he; and therefore truly, sir, I think it's clear that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that government that he hath not had a voice to put himself under…. I should doubt whether he was an Englishman or no that should doubt of these things."

For my part, I should doubt whether anyone who doubted these things was a liberal. ■

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Anthony Domestico

Fiction in Fragments

Speedboat

Renata Adler
New York Review Books, $14, 192 pp.

Pitch Dark

Renata Adler
New York Review Books, $14, 168 pp.

Henry Green, one of the most neglected great writers of the twentieth century, has been described as "a writer's writer's writer." This designation points not just to the technical brilliance of Green's prose but also to the small, cultish, and hyper-sophisticated nature of his readership. To say that you know and cherish Green's *Loving* or *Living* or *Doting* is a sign that your taste is as exacting as your literary knowledge is vast.

Renata Adler is also a writer's writer's writer, an essayist and novelist whose exquisite style and sharp wit have led to passionate but never particularly widespread praise. Adler is probably best known for her 1980 essay "House Critic," a piece in which she memorably described Pauline Kael's *New Yorker* reviews as "jarringly, piece by piece, line by line, and without interruption, worthless." But she's most revered as the author of two slim, elliptical novels: *Speedboat*, published in 1976, and *Pitch Dark*, published in 1983.

Renata Adler at a reading of Speedboat *and* Pitch Dark

CENTER FOR FICTION

The novels—experimental in form, restless in intelligence, and dark in humor—were rapturously received, but they quickly went out of print. For years, they were passed around like samizdat. Those in the know knew—David Foster Wallace included *Speedboat* in a course he taught at Pomona College—but most readers did not know and would in any case have had trouble finding a copy of either book. That is, until this year. In 2010, the National Book Critics Circle identified *Speedboat* as the book they'd most like to see back in print, and now New York Review Books has answered the call, re-issuing *Speedboat* and *Pitch Dark* in beautiful paperback form. For the first time in a long time, Adler's fiction will get a chance to move beyond its small coterie of admirers.

Speedboat and *Pitch Dark* are almost impossible to describe in conventional novelistic terms. Yes, they both have a central protagonist/narrator: in *Speedboat*, it's Jen Fain, a tabloid reporter and sometime college instructor; in *Pitch Dark*, it's Kate Ennis, also a writer, slightly older and a lot sadder. And yes, they both have a clearly defined setting (upper-middle-class New York in the 1970s) and some semblance of a plot. In *Speedboat*, Jen drifts from romantic attachment to romantic attachment until, in the end, she gets pregnant (maybe). In *Pitch Dark*, Kate sees an affair end, drifts to an island off the coast of Washington and then to Ireland, gets caught up in several seemingly sinister plots, until, in the end, she gets back together with her lover (probably).

But none of these categories—character, plot, setting—does justice to what reading Adler's novels actually feels like, precisely because Adler is uninterested in the traditional armature of the novel. At times, *Speedboat* and *Pitch Dark* read like diaries: Jen tells us about the horrors of a dinner party and then relates a conversation she overheard on the subway; Kate tells us about a nightmarish experience she had with Irish bureaucracy and then describes an awkward interaction she had with a neighbor. At other times, Adler breaks whatever narrative flow there is to offer the reader mini-essays on the nature of prayer or the American legal system (Adler has a JD from Yale Law School). Sometimes Adler will give us fully fleshed-out scenes, as when Jen remembers her days in college; sometimes she will cut a scene short, leaving us unsure of exactly what happened or what it all meant.

Adler, in short, wants to write a different kind of fiction, one that relies not on narrative arc but on fragmentation, not on the slow, patient enrichment of character and theme but on syncopation and associative leaps. *Speedboat* and *Pitch Dark* do what Virginia Woolf said modern fiction should do: "trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness."

To read *Speedboat* and *Pitch Dark* is to be confronted by a sense of groundlessness: Where am I, and who is speaking to me? Both novels use the technique

of collage—they're composed of short, elliptical paragraphs that often start off in one direction only to move in about seven new ones before arriving at a new place altogether. It's often difficult to grasp how one sentence leads to the next; it's even more difficult to keep track of how you got from one paragraph to the other. It's a restless, jumpy style, never willing to settle into a single register, scene, or theme for too long.

Here's one example, taken from *Speedboat*. Adler first presents an amusing conversation between two unknown, unnamed characters about a wife being chased by an elephant: "How extraordinary," one of the characters proclaims; "Yes, it was too awful," the other responds. Then, Adler jumps to the odd cast of characters Jen Fain regularly sees at the 42nd Street branch of the public library: "one who doodles the same bird endlessly on the back of a half of a single bank check, one who hums all the time, and one who keeps asking the other two to stop. A little pantomime concerto." Then, there's another reported conversation, this time between Jen and a girl who are sitting near each other on a puddle-jumper airplane. Finally, we get to a single-line paragraph, which reads, in its entirety, "Another weekend. Any dreams. P.O. Box 1492."

The reader is put in a challenging position. Do I try and press the seemingly irrelevant detail into significance? (Is "P.O. Box 1492" an allusion to Christopher Columbus? Is the laconic conversation about elephants making fun of Hemingway?) Do I attempt to discover the unseen connections between individual vignettes? Or do I just accept that the gaps are themselves the point and enjoy each paragraph as its own, self-sufficient unit?

This may make it sound as if reading Adler were just an (exhausting) intellectual exercise, but that's not really the case. Adler is a brilliant and enjoyable writer on a sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph level. She's lucid, funny, and smart. Her prose is sometimes almost aphoristic: "There are times when every act, no matter how private or unconscious, becomes political." "Deliberate, pointless boredom is a kind of menace, and a disturbing exercise of power." (Adler knows that aphorism often gives only the appearance of truth. At one point, she describes the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes as "an instance of the hollow, perfectly specious aphorism.")

It can be difficult to discern any organizing principle in the scraps of dialogue and suggestive anecdotes that Adler picks up and presents for our amusement. But there are two large-scale subjects that can serve as guiding threads to *Speedboat* and *Pitch Dark*.

The first is the strangeness of language as such. Both Jen Fain and Kate Ennis display great sensitivity to the ways in which language shapes—that is to say, both enriches and distorts—our experience of the world. In *Speedboat*, Jen ponders the existential abyss opened up by the term "self-addressed envelope": "Such an envelope, immutably itself, is always precisely where it belongs." A minor character in *Speedboat*, Joel Seidington, "thought when he knew what a thing was called, he had nailed it. Or, rather, a thing burned more brightly for a second when he held its name to it; then it was ash." You emerge from both novels freshly attuned to just how weird everyday speech can be. Adler is wonderful on the insidiousness of clichés, particularly within the journalistic world:

> Talent was blazing through the columns and onto the coffee tables. The physical-assault metaphor had taken over the reviews. "Guts," never much of a word outside the hunting season, was a favorite in literary prose. People were said to have or to lack them, to perceive beauty and make moral distinctions in no other place…"Nerve-shattering," "eye-popping," "bone-crunching"—the responsive critic was a crushed, impaled, electrocuted man. "Searing" was lukewarm.

Adler's second major theme is the strangeness of social existence. She possesses a Proustian ability to describe and skewer social conventions.

Adler gives us a rich portrait of New York in the 1970s, the kinds of controversies that were continually discussed (Watergate, birth control, the IRA) and the various attitudes taken toward them (angry, bemused, ambivalent). We hear about the books an intellectual, liberal woman of the time would have been shaped by:

> We may have read and reread, with curiosity, D. H. Lawrence. But if we were, in the end, as young adults and in sexual matters, anyone's creatures, we were also, though we would never have mentioned it to one another, John O'Hara's. Highly educated. Even original or finely tuned. But his creatures all the same.

The best passages combine Adler's eye for social mores with her ear for linguistic absurdity:

> For a while, I thought I had no real interests—no theater, concerts, museums, stamp collections. Only ambitions and ties to people, of a certain intensity. Different sorts of people. I was becoming a ward heeler of the emotional life. Now the ambitions have drifted after the interests. I have lost my sense of the whole. I wait for events to take a form. I remember somebody saying, "You've got to steep yourself in things." So I steeped myself, in thrillers, commercials, news magazines. The same person used to write "tepid" and "arguable" all over the margins of what our obituary writers wrote. I now think "tepid" and "arguable" several times a day.

To write about Adler, you have to quote her regularly and at length. That's a lesson that Adler's novels themselves teach us: that quotation is itself an intellectual and stylistic exercise; that the pleasure of artful scavenging may be different from that of original thinking, but it's a pleasure nonetheless.

Speedboat and *Pitch Dark* are strange works because the world they describe is strange. Like Emily Dickinson, Adler tells all the truth but tells it slant. That's because, as Jen Fain puts it, "the reality I inhabit is already slant." ■

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Margaret O'Brien Steinfels

Absurd Reality

Dossier K

Imre Kertész
Translated by Tim Wilkinson
Melville House, $18.95, 218 pp.

Imre Kertész is a concentration-camp survivor who keeps a distance from the slogans that remind us "never again." He resists the impulse to create meaning out of an "absurdity," criticizing even the word that has come to sum up this history: Holocaust.

Kertész's novels, short stories, and essays spell out these views. But who has read him? We have barely heard of him, and for many reasons. He writes in Hungarian, not exactly a lingua franca. In 1945 he left behind the horrors of German Nazism soon to fall into the oppression of Hungarian Communism. He spent two decades forgetting Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Then in 2002, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature. For authors lauded in their native countries, the prize is icing on the cake. For others, like Kertész, it provides a first taste of recognition. Another benefit is widespread translation. Today, much of his writing is available to readers of English, including *Dossier K*. Although it is subtitled "a memoir," Kertész suggests teasingly that it may be a novel. Whatever it is—memoir, novel, dialogue (its actual format)—better to think of it as the key to reading his fiction: "Imre Kertész for Dummies."

Fatelessness, his first novel, is unnerving. That the narrator survives Auschwitz and Buchenwald is "an industrial accident in the machinery of death," Kertész declares. Nothing is allowed to explain the fact of survival, neither faith nor providence nor human decency nor sheer endurance. The straightforward narrative develops, as one critic writes, without, "the authority of the retrospective moment." That is what is unnerving: no moral judgments, no questions of motive, no reflections on causes or consequences. In *Dossier K*, Kertész sums it up in citing an SS prison guard who, when asked "Why?" replies, "There is no why here."

The novel opens in 1944. Hungarian police seize fourteen-year-old György Köves on the outskirts of Budapest. With youthful workmates who had been drafted for labor at the Shell Oil Company, he is sent to Auschwitz. Saved from the gas chambers by a Kapo who warns the boys to lie and say they are sixteen, they are sent to labor at Buchenwald in Germany. György is content to fall in with the routine of camp life, which he describes in matter-of-fact detail. Not exactly Boy Scout camp, but initially a novelty to the teenager. In time, like the other prisoners, he begins to starve; belatedly he notices his skeletal condition. Then his leg becomes infected. Finally, he is beaten and left for dead on a cold, wet ramp. Unlike the others, however, he is saved and cared for in a clandestine infirmary run by Buchenwald's political prisoners. On April 11, 1945, General Patton's army liberates the camp and Köves "return[s] to the world of humankind," to Budapest, and to another year of high school. Yet on his return he must contend with fellow Jews, neighbors who, having eluded Nazi round-ups and remained in Budapest, cannot credit Köves's experience.

As *Dossier K* makes clear, György Köves's story is Imre Kertész's story. The return to Budapest began Kertész's twenty-year amnesia, during which he took up daily life as a student, a journalist, a factory worker, a librettist for light operas, and belatedly a novelist. Improbable as the diversion from Auschwitz, the rescue from near-death, and the clandestine infirmary may seem, these actually happened to Kertész. When he began writing *Fatelessness* in 1965, so many years after this ordeal, his adolescent experience had receded

from memory and a fictional György Köves emerged to tell the story, as he reports in *Dossier K*. "I was able to slip out of my own skin...without betraying my own experiences." The writing took many years; his travails are played out in three subsequent novels, *Fiasco, Kaddish for an Unborn Child,* and *Liquidation*.

Where the narrative of *Fatelessness* is straightforward, the later novels are convoluted interior monologues, the narrator tormented in pursuit of the "why." Why has he been spared, while others have perished? The sentences circle and repeat, sink into minutiae about the room—its size, its contents, its orientation—where the writer (Köves/Kertész) obsesses over his unfinished novel. Suicidal thoughts are never far from his mind; indeed, in *Liquidation*, the unseen, elusive B has killed himself and his purported novel has been destroyed. Always there remains that "why?"

Why? In *Dossier K*, Kertész concludes, "the secret of survival is collaboration." The survivor is a "well-oiled component of the machinery that has been set up for [his] own destruction." No great leap of logic is required to ask of the victims: Does Kertész think they collaborated in their own executions? The question unavoidably carries a suggestion of blame or responsibility. But Kertész dodges that disconcerting idea by submerging it into a larger moral statement. He reverts to the fictional Köves, who, he writes, "can attribute his escape to an incomprehensible absurdity in the same way that the cause of his death would have been an incomprehensible absurdity." Absurdity, in a word, is what Kertész makes of the death camps, and not only of them, but also of the universe itself.

Living under a communist regime, Kertész recognized the same machinery of collaboration, the same incomprehensible absurdity. "The ordeal of the death camps becomes a human experience where I come across the universality of the ordeal, and that is fatelessness, that specific aspect of dictatorships, the expropriation, nationalization of one's own fate, turning it into a mass fate, the stripping away of a human being's most human essence." The implicit comparison to Nazism was unthinkable in 1960s Hungary and *Fatelessness* was rejected for publication. It finally appeared in 1975 to scant notice.

In defiance, Kertész has lived a life without allegiances or identity, Jewish or Hungarian. He stands apart from his nationality and his religious tradition. In *Fatelessness*, Köves, ignorant of Hebrew, is shunned by Orthodox Jews in the camp. But why else, he asks himself, is he in Buchenwald except that he is Jewish? Likewise, Kertész's fellow Hungarians, even in the post-Communist culture, have shunned him. Why are his novels in Hungarian, we might ask, except that he is Hungarian? He sums up: "I was drummed out of the nation like a troublemaker from a tin pot boarding school."

For more than a decade, Kertész has lived in Berlin of all places, an ironic outcome of the translation of *Fatelessness* into German in 1996. It was embraced by a generation eager to understand that nation's responsibility for the camps in which millions died. Kertész has been welcomed in the land of the SS. Why? Did the absence of moral judgment make the story accessible? Did matter-of-fact language rather than preachments allow young Germans to absorb the horrors about which their parents could never speak? Finally Kertész has found his readers. He tells of an encounter with a German academic who "threw himself tearfully into my arms, and I held him as if I were able to bestow absolution." As he makes clear, Kertész is not in the business of absolving anyone, least of all himself. His work simply makes repentance possible for others.

Accounts of the camps have faded with the deaths over many decades of the survivors. Kertész's belated appearance, or our belated sighting of him, gives us another way of embracing their stories, in this case, Kertész's experience of the absurd. ■

Margaret O'Brien Steinfels, *former editor of* Commonweal, *is co-founder of the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture.*

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U.S. News & World Report, and is on the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll.

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Superintendent of Catholic Schools, Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston

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The schools of the Archdiocese offer an education that combines academic excellence and Catholic faith formation to ensure lifelong learning and the development of responsible and compassionate citizens. Cardinal O'Malley supports the pursuit of new approaches to organize, fund and manage Catholic education across the Archdiocese. He has declared the revitalization and reinvigoration of Catholic education throughout the Archdiocese as a top priority, committing resources towards a creative and energetic approach to address the issues facing Catholic schools.

The new Superintendent will inherit an organization well-positioned for achievement and success, in large part due to the work of his/her predecessor, as well as the energy and enthusiasm of a supportive local community. S/he will benefit from new organizational structures that will more readily meet the human and financial needs of the schools going forward. With successful academy models in Dorchester, Brockton, Lawrence, and Quincy serving as proof points, and the encouragement of the Archdiocesan leadership to continue to think creatively about change, RCAB is ready to continue further implementation of the strategic plan.

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The next issue of Commonweal will be dated May 2, 2014.

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Sister's All Right

Kaitlin Campbell

I was waiting for the late bus—the only bus in the San Francisco Bay area making stops between midnight and 4 a.m.—sitting under the only working street lamp on the block. Not a person in sight. I sat listening to wind whistling through barbed wire. Fifteen minutes and I'd be safely riding home—if the bus was on time, and if I could brave the wait. But this was West Oakland, after hours. Anything that could happen would most likely be bad.

I took stock. No purse (good), $2.10 in change, a dead cell phone, keys, and glow-in-the-dark rosary beads in my pockets. But I was wearing a long cotton dress that, though modest, wouldn't let me pass as androgynous. Reduced to the shape of a woman, a vulnerable woman I became. A black sedan drove by twice, braking in front of me each time before driving away. I stopped breathing. I didn't move. I watched.

Across the avenue, an abandoned fried-chicken shack stood beside a row of gutted payphone booths where I'd seen people sleep, pee, smoke, and drink during the day. A halal butcher's boarded-up windows were painted with red letters advertising "FRESH MEAT." The Western Union, Autozone, and God's Word Christian Center were lightless and empty.

I considered sprinting the five blocks back to my friend's place and spending the night there. And then to my left I saw movement—a figure walking slowly toward me. I turned; the person had the size, shape, and gait of a man. I faced forward. He sat down next to me, inches from my ear and, as I carefully composed my face into a blank mask, began in a low, sultry voice: "What's your name, girl? Listen—"

I'd heard it all before. I knew what he wanted, I could foresee a number of ways he might try to get it, and I knew that I needed a plan. Get up and run? No—he seemed strong and sober. Start screaming? No—that could incite violence. Start praying the rosary? No, because that would break street rule number one: Don't show fear. But he was getting angry. "C'mon, say something. I'm not a bad dude. What about—" It became clear I needed to speak to him, to make human contact.

"Hello!" I beamed, facing him. "How are you? I know you're not a bad person. To be honest, I didn't know what to say. And I'm afraid I can't give you what you're looking for. I'm Sister Katherine, a Sister of Mercy. We're a Roman Catholic order—have you heard of a woman named Catherine McAuley? She's our foundress. 1831." I kept talking…about my day at St. Anthony's with the friars, about my favorite theologians, prayers, gospels. I showed him my rosary, and asked him if he believed in God.

At first he was incredulous—"What? Like a nun?"—and couldn't quite seem to wrap his head around it: "Where's your cape thing then?" That bought me time. When he cut in with questions—"So you live alone?"—I'd answer him intently, "No, there are about four of us living in community," and then muse, "Some days it's a challenge, others a grace...." Pretty soon I'd fully abandoned myself to becoming a character-composite of every nun I knew, acting out of adrenaline or grace. "Grace," I yelled. "It's all grace!"

Even so, the bus was now late and my audience was losing patience. His frustration erupted into his hands and he one-two punched the air in front of him. "So you—" he turned and pointed at me, frowning. "You're saying that you can't have sex."

STEVE PARTRIDGE

My throat tightened. Our eyes were competitively locked. What to say now? Behind him I saw headlights, the familiar neon-green number 800. The bus. "Well," I said to the sky, "I don't really look at it that way. God is good, look. The bus is here."

I stood up to wave it down, and he sat shaking his head on the bench. I motioned for him to stand, and he broke into a laugh, and kept laughing. When the bus driver caught sight of us, he sped up and nearly drove over the curb. He was staring at me, wide-eyed. "Are you all right, ma'am?" I smiled, nodded, and handed him my fare. "Nah we cool, we cool," my companion boarding behind me explained. "Sister's all right."■

Kaitlin Campbell *is* Commonweal*'s marketing coordinator.*

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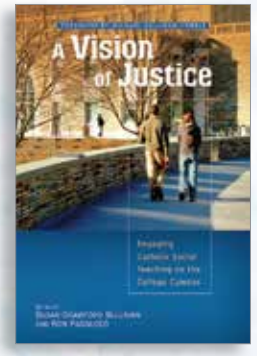

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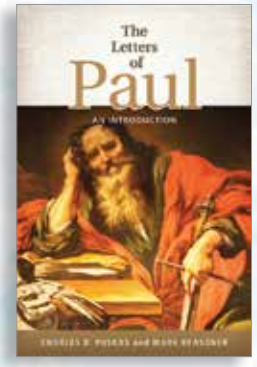

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