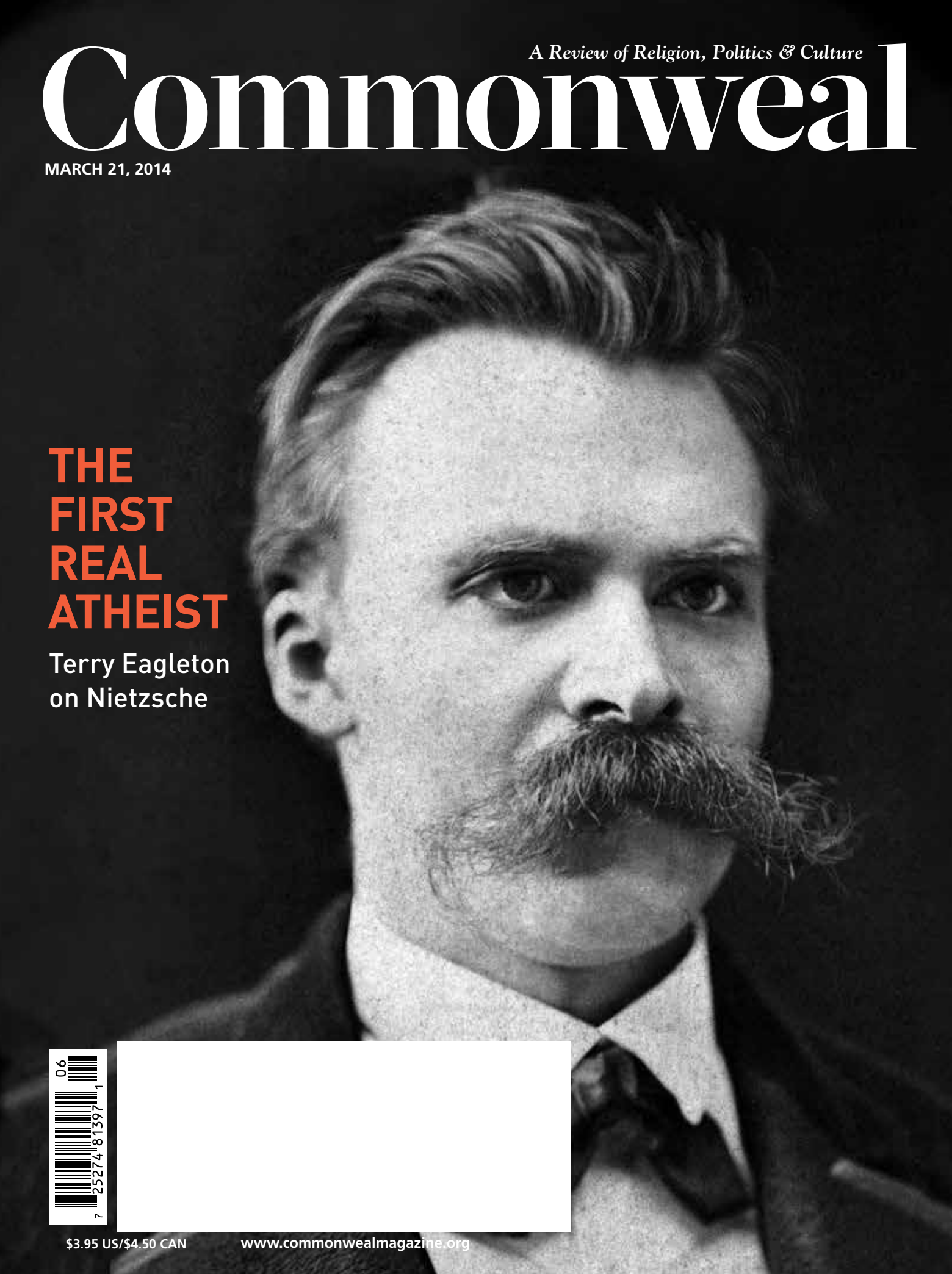
A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

Commonweal

MARCH 21, 2014



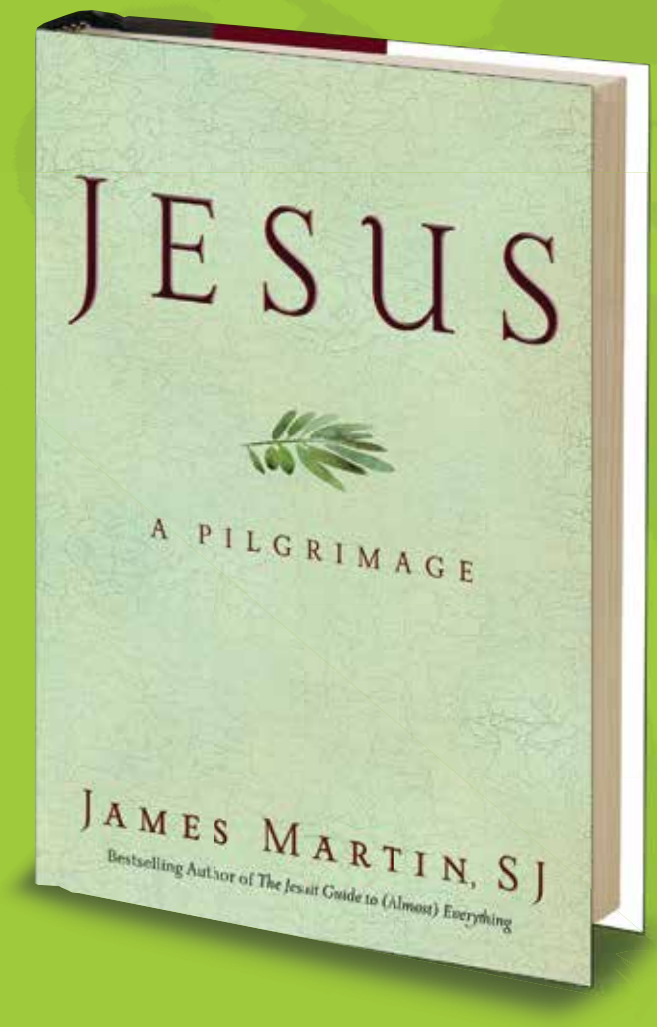
THE FIRST REAL ATHEIST

Terry Eagleton on Nietzsche

$3.95 US/$4.50 CAN

www.commonwealmagazine.org

Journey into the Heart and Times of Jesus



"One of the best books I've read in years—on any subject."
—Mary Karr, author of *Lit*

"Remarkable."
—Daniel J. Harrington, SJ

"Refreshingly innovative.... A superb gift."
—Archbishop Desmond Tutu

"Complex, compelling spiritual testimony."
***—Publishers Weekly* starred review**

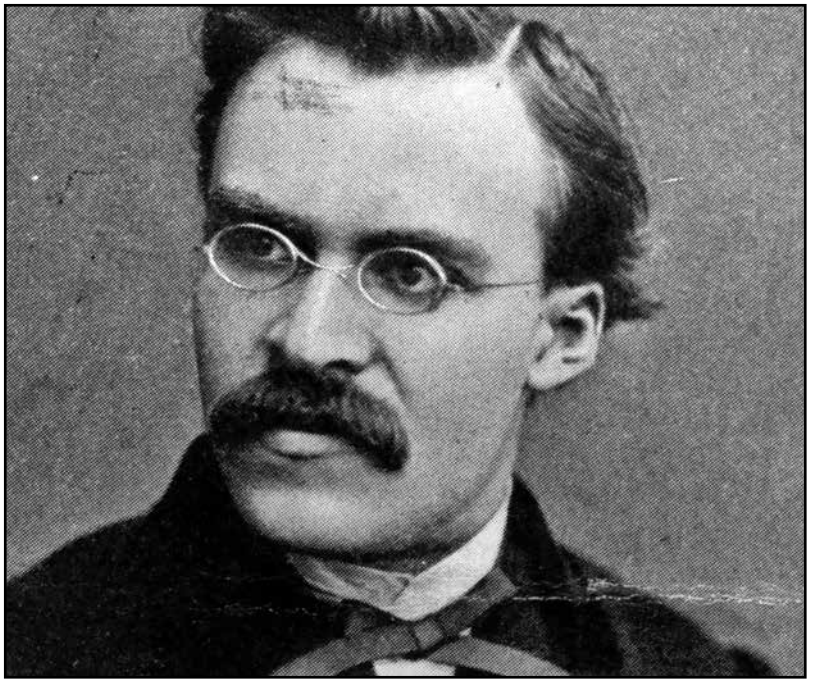
Available Wherever Books and Ebooks Are Sold

HarperOne *An Imprint of* HarperCollins*Publishers* www.harperone.com

Commonweal

MARCH 21, 2014 • VOLUME 141 • NUMBER 6

ARTICLE



Friedrich Nietzsche

SHORT TAKE

COLUMNIST

UPFRONT

FILM

BOOKS

POETRY

LAST WORD

Founded in 1924
Commonweal

Editor
Paul Baumann

Associate Editors
Grant Gallicho, Matthew Boudway, Mollie Wilson O'Reilly

Production
Tiina Aleman

Digital Editor
Dominic Preziosi

Copy Editor
Susanne Washburn

Tablet Edition
KeriLee Horan

Editorial Assistant
Ellen B. Koneck

Marketing Coordinator
Kaitlin Campbell

Business Manager
James Hannan

Development
Christa A. Kerber

Poetry
Rosemary Deen

Film
Richard Alleva, Rand Richards Cooper

Stage / Media / Television
Celia Wren

Columnists
E. J. Dionne Jr., Anthony Domestico, John Garvey, Cathleen Kaveny, Jo McGowan, Charles R. Morris, Mollie Wilson O'Reilly, William Pfaff, Margaret O'Brien Steinfels

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

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

Publisher
Thomas Baker

Commonweal [ISSN 0010-3330], a review of public affairs, religion, literature, and the arts, is published biweekly, except in April, July, August, and November, when it is published monthly, by Commonweal Foundation, 475 Riverside Drive, Rm. 405, New York, NY 10115. Telephone: (212) 662-4200. E-mail: editors@commonwealmagazine.org. Fax: (212) 662-4183. POSTMASTER: send address changes to *Commonweal*, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834-9982.

Commonweal is indexed in Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, Book Review Digest, and Book Review Index. *Commonweal* articles are available at many libraries and research facilities via ProQuest and OpinionArchives. Serials Data program No.: ISSN 0010-3330. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional offices.

Single Copy, $3.95. Yearly print subscriptions, U.S., $65; Canada, $70; other parts of the world, $75. Special two-year rate: U.S. $98; Canada, $108; other parts of the world, $118. Add $45 for airmail. For digital and online subscription options visit www.commonwealmagazine.org/digital.

Cover design: Cecilia Guerrero Rezes
Cover photo: F. Hartmann circa 1875

LETTERS

Darwinian ethics, Jesus & the Jews

DOWN ON DARWIN

In "Darwin's Tree of Life" (January 24), Elizabeth A. Johnson's contention that Darwin helps us understand our responsibility to creation is pretty startling. Darwin supported the laissez-faire capitalism of his father-in-law Lord Wedgewood, one of the richest industrialists in the world at that time, because it mirrored the ruthless competition he observed in nature. The implication that Naturalism supports the moral responsibility to husband other species or exercise stewardship over the creation is simply not true. The writings of the theologian John Haught and Pope John Paul II are not derived from Darwin or Naturalism.

PAUL A. HOTTINGER
Naperville, Ill.

THE AUTHOR REPLIES:

The project of *Ask the Beasts* is explicitly one of dialogue. The purpose of placing *On the Origin of Species* in conversation with the Nicene Creed is to develop a theology that makes loving the earth an intrinsic part of faith in God, rather than an add-on.

Three points: First, the focus is not Darwin the man, but the way he could see. The evolutionary story he figured out places nature in a new narrative framework, still heading toward the future.

Second, competition is only one aspect of evolution; cooperation also factors in, as does diversification, etc. In our day, Darwin is being read as having a sharp ecological sensibility, utterly clear about the interdependence of species upon one another.

Third, John Paul II called on theologians to engage contemporary scientific findings "to test their value in bringing out from Christian belief some of the possibilities which have not yet been realized." Here the pope mentioned evolution in particular, saying it could shed new light on human beings as the image of God, and even on understandings of Jesus Christ. In a word, not only is evolution not opposed to faith; it might even clarify faith in new and deeper ways.

Once we see that the evolving community of life on earth continues to be the dwelling place of the Spirit and its ruination an unspeakable sin; once we understand that this community is blessedly included in the redeemed future promised in Jesus Christ; once we realize that the emerging existence of plants and animals is a radically free gift of the Creator: then deep affection for the tree of life shown in action on behalf of eco-justice becomes an indivisible part of spirituality.

ELIZABETH A. JOHNSON, CSJ

MAXIMUM JESUS

It may seem the height of hubris to question eleven pages devoted to learned discussion on Jewish-Christian relations ("Getting Past Supersessionism," February 21). I admire much of the exchange, but it seems to avoid the most crucial issue in answering the question on the magazine's cover: "Who do you say that I am?" The biggest dilemma isn't about Messiahship, at least not now. It's about whether Jesus is God, Second Person of the Trinity, True God and Man. Many Christians confess this, but there has been a mostly condemned and persecuted line of thought from Arians to Socinians to Unitarians that doesn't so maximize Jesus. My guess is that many progressive Christians today are at least crypto-Arians but don't write about it for fear of church reprisals. Just as the present dialogue couldn't have happened in 1914, I wonder how it would look from 2114 if the commentators could get a furlough from heaven to resume the conversation. After centuries of science and historical-cultural analysis of creedal statements, the question will have changed a great deal from how it

continued on page 29

From the Editors

Power Play

The events that trigger major international conflicts often appear strangely small in retrospect. A hundred years ago an Austrian archduke on a visit to Sarajevo was assassinated by a Serbian nationalist; within five years 37 million people had died in a war that involved all the world's great powers. From a single tragedy in a remote corner of Europe, a continental disaster.

Recent events in Ukraine have now provided another example of this paradox. When, last November, the country's now-deposed president, Viktor Yanukovych, failed to sign a trade agreement with the European Union because of pressure from Moscow, few predicted it would lead to bloodshed in the streets of Kiev; fewer still expected it to result in a dangerous standoff between Russia and the West. Now that it has, many are wondering how the situation could have spun out of control so quickly. The full answer to this question will one day fill volumes. The short answer is named Vladimir Putin.

For the Russian president, the dissolution of the Soviet Union remains a dishonor to be avenged. Mother Russia has her own manifest destiny, which she can realize only by standing up to the West and reclaiming her dignity. After the corrupt Yanukovych fled Kiev in disgrace, Putin saw an opportunity for Russia to assert itself in the ensuing power vacuum. On the thin pretext of protecting ethnic Russians, he got Russia's upper house of parliament to authorize an invasion and immediately seized control of the Crimean peninsula, in violation of international law and Russia's 1994 guarantee to respect Ukraine's territorial integrity in exchange for the country's surrender of its nuclear weapons. Contrary to Russian propaganda, there is no evidence that Ukraine's Russian population faces any danger from the new provisional government in Kiev. This isn't about Russia's responsibility to protect its own; this is a power play.

And not the first. When the government of Georgia turned away from Moscow and toward the West in 2008, Russia responded by sending troops into the Georgian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which it still occupies. But the stakes are much higher in Ukraine, a country of 46 million people that borders members of NATO and the E.U. Western Europe gets much of its energy from Russia through natural-gas pipelines that pass through Ukraine. If that country implodes in civil war or is crushed by its neighbor to the east, the consequences will be felt throughout the continent.

That means the United States and its allies cannot afford to look away. But it *doesn't* mean they should rush into a military confrontation with Russia, which, though no longer a superpower, remains a nuclear power—and an increasingly dangerous one. Western leaders must make good on their pledge to punish Russia for its violation of Ukrainian sovereignty in Crimea, but they should also be careful not to do too much too soon. As we go to press, Russian forces have tightened their grip on Crimea and massed along Ukraine's eastern border. If they stop there, the worst can still be averted. However the United States and its allies respond to what's already happened in Crimea, where most of the population is Russian, they must have something left, short of war, with which to punish Russia if it decides to invade the rest of the country. If they use up all the available sanctions to punish Russia for its takeover of Crimea, Putin could decide that he may as well finish what he's started: better to be hung for a sheep than a lamb. The seizure of Crimea is reason enough for the United States to skip the G-8 meeting Putin was supposed to host in Sochi this June. But before we throw Russia out of the G-8 altogether—or start freezing Russian assets or issuing broad travel bans—we should wait to see what Putin does next. If his main purpose was to humiliate Ukraine's new government, he's already succeeded and may choose to stop while he's ahead. In any case, our own purpose should not be to humiliate Russia, but to protect Ukraine and the rest of Europe from Putin's recklessness. That will require patience and prudence, as well as nerve.

In Washington, the blame-Obama-first crowd are now saying that Russia wouldn't have dared to seize Crimea if it hadn't first been emboldened by President Obama's failure to carry out his threat to bomb Syria, a Russian ally. This sort of partisan opportunism on the brink of an international crisis is unseemly, to say the least. Now is no time for point-scoring, or for the purely rhetorical demand that the White House somehow get tough with Russia. If the president's critics want to propose a policy the president isn't already considering, let them do so, with as little rancor and sanctimony as possible. So far, at least, Republican hawks have wasted their time, and ours, striking brave poses and loudly pining for the good old days of Cold War brinkmanship. ■

March 4, 2014

Margaret O'Brien Steinfels

The Real Battlefield

AT THE DEFENSE DEPARTMENT, IT'S MONEY VERSUS DUTY

On October 15, 2006, President George W. Bush asked Robert Gates to replace Donald Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense. Even though he was a member of the Washington establishment, a former head of the CIA, a moderate Republican who served four presidents—and a former Eagle Scout—Gates hesitated. The United States was in the midst of two faltering wars. Soldiers were serving multiple tours of duty. The military was suffering battle fatigue. The political tide was turning against the war in Iraq. Then president of Texas A&M, Gates saw students graduate and leave for war. He knew some who were killed in action and others who returned grievously wounded.

If the wars had been going better, Gates might have said no, but efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan were floundering. Brent Scowcroft and George H. W. Bush probably lobbied him to take the job. He did his duty and said yes. And in 2009 he said yes again, this time to Barack Obama. In four-and-a-half years as Secretary of Defense, Gates discovered that America's real wars don't take place on far-flung battlefields, but in the interstices of the federal government.

Duty, Gates's memoir, has been criticized for telling too much too soon, but just as he did his duty to his commanders-in-chief, he now does his duty to his fellow citizens, who are still paying for two failed wars. He explains how that happened.

It is easy to start wars, hard to end them. They grind on well past their sell-by date. The overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq did not bring fighting to a conclusion. But there was no plan B until Gates organized policy and garnered resources to support the surge in Iraq's Anbar Province. The same strategy in Afghanistan under Obama has had only a modest effect. Though outright defeat was staved off during Gates's tenure (2006–11), both Iraq and Afghanistan remain sources of terrorism and conflict.

The Department of Defense, Gates discovered, is organized to plan wars but not to fight them. The Pentagon fights wars but operates with five-year budgets. "Urgent requests [from the field] were weighed against…existing long-term plans...and available budgets, and all too often were found to be lower in priority than nearly everything else." Field commanders were told: Sorry, maybe next year. Gates threw his weight behind delivering mine-resistant vehicles to Iraq in order to save lives and limbs. Adapting those vehicles to Afghanistan's terrain required another shift in priorities; other adjustments followed.

Money for weapons development and procurement greases the wheels of the defense industry, whose pervasive influence shocked Gates. Resources were diverted by the pleas of lobbyists and pressure from Congress. Legislators seemed more interested in cosseting defense contractors in their districts than providing for battlefield needs. Gates managed to end some unnecessary weapons programs, but others persist.

In public, government officials laud and applaud our men and women in uniform. But, while Gates doesn't put it this way, our policies often treat soldiers as cannon fodder. When the *Washington Post* reported the shockingly poor care the wounded were receiving at Walter Reed Hospital, Gates was enraged. Heads rolled. Careers ended. Practices changed. His order to reduce battlefield-evacuation times to one hour met with resistance, but eventually he made it happen. Yet the Veterans Administration, another piece of the problem in securing benefits for the wounded, lay beyond his authority.

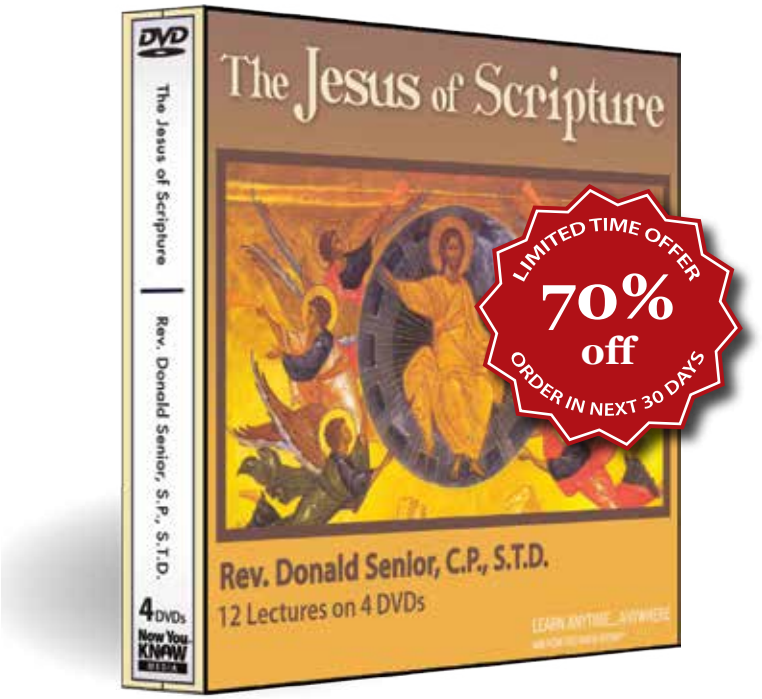
War is the business of the Pentagon and the Department of Defense, but Gates shows that serious diplomacy often falls to the secretary, admirals, generals, and battlefield commanders. The State Department is underfunded and understaffed, a fact he pointed out to two presidents. A consequence of that imbalance, Gates notes, is that officials from both the Pentagon and the DOD have slowed the political drive for armed intervention. If nothing else, they know its costs.

Gates is daring to call his memoir *Duty*. If a golden age once summoned willing hearts, that time has given way to the suspicion that with duty comes moral complicity. Whatever the final verdict on his time as secretary of defense, the angry conscience that lay beneath the man's calm demeanor has spoken. True, Gates does not condemn these failing wars, yet mitigating their consequences is not morally trivial. ■

Robert Gates

DOD PHOTO BY CHERIE A. THURLBY

Now You KNOW MEDIA



Discover the Jesus of Scripture Anew

Surely no one has made a greater impact on human history than Jesus of Nazareth. His life, example and teachings have had a profound influence on every generation since His death and resurrection. The quest for Jesus is unending, and many images of Jesus have been revered over the centuries.

Join one of the world's leading Catholic New Testament experts in this inspiring course. Through these 12 special talks, you will explore the most powerful source for our understanding of Jesus: the New Testament. You will discover the nature of the four Gospels, their historical reliability and the distinctive dimensions of Jesus' mission portrayed by the Evangelists.

The portrait of Jesus found in the four Gospels and echoed in the rest of the New Testament writings remains powerful, beautiful and compelling. These texts are biographies meant to inspire and transform, and you will explore them as windows through which to view Jesus. You will find this course fascinating and exceptionally well taught. Don't miss out on this special sale.

Must order within 30 days of issue date

1-800-955-3904

www.NowYouKnowMedia.com/Jesus

Now You Know Media, Inc.
12115 Parklawn Dr., Unit B • Rockville, MD 20852

The Jesus of Scripture

5-CD or 4-DVD Program

Presented by Rev. Donald Senior, C.P., S.T.D.

President, Catholic Theological Union

Lecture Titles

1. Introduction
2. The Gospels as Portraits of Jesus
3. The Origin of Jesus and His Identity as Son of God
4. Jesus and His Disciples
5. Jesus the Healer
6. Jesus as Teacher
7. Jesus the Prophet
8. Jesus the Christ
9. The Passion and Death of Jesus
10. The Meaning of Jesus' Death
11. Jesus Risen
12. Beyond Jesus: The Risen Christ and the Early Church

The Jesus of Scripture
12 Lectures (25 minutes/lecture)
+ electronic study guide

SAVE $150

4 DVD Set ~~$209.95~~ **SALE $59.95**
5 CD Set ~~$119.95~~ **SALE $35.95**

+ $8.95 Shipping & Handling
100% Satisfaction Guarantee
Coupon Code: A1752

Now You Know Media's mission is to bring you the best Catholic professors and retreat leaders in America. Carefully selected for their scholarship, faithful insight and teaching excellence, our speakers will touch your heart and engage your intellect. Visit our website to browse our growing catalog of over 200 courses and retreats available in CD, DVD, and MP3 formats.

Ronald E. Osborn

Just-War Illusions

SHROUDING BRUTALITIES WITH THEOLOGICAL EUPHEMISMS

Man carries child injured in airstrike in Aleppo, Syria

CNS PHOTO / AMMAR ABDULLAH, REUTERS

In the early weeks of September 2013, when it appeared likely that the United States would launch missile strikes on Syria in retaliation for its use of chemical weapons against civilians, *Commonweal* published two opinion pieces responding to the Obama administration's case for going to war. George Hunsinger rejected U.S. bombing on the grounds that it would fail to satisfy classical "just war" criteria; *Commonweal* editor Paul Baumann, in a dissent from the magazine's editorial position, supported strikes by appealing to the same principles. We are now faced with a discomforting reality that should cause us to critically examine not the validity of the arguments presented by both writers so much as the stage on which those arguments played out: the just-war tradition itself as it has come to be understood by many Christians in debates about U.S. foreign policy.

Ultimately, it was not the just-war debate, nor any refined moral calculus in the tradition of St. Thomas Aquinas or Hugo Grotius, that determined the actual course of U.S. policy. It was, rather, self-interested maneuverings on all sides and particularly by Russia that simultaneously extricated Obama from the political corner he had boxed himself into, elevated Russian President Vladimir Putin's status as a diplomatic power broker, and rescued Bashar al-Assad from a significant military blow, even as his regime continues to commit war crimes and atrocities. In this light both Hunsinger's and Baumann's arguments from the just-war tradition have a somewhat surreal quality. Taken together, their articles leave us with the impression that policy-makers are actually listening to what Christian moral theorists have to say—and that standard just-war language is the only language left to the church in the face of violence.

But this is not the case. One option that went unconsidered in *Commonweal* (although Hunsinger's article came closest to it) is a stance sometimes referred to as "just-war pacifism." Just-war pacifists may or may not be "absolute pacifists"; their position does not require that they deny the legitimacy of force in extreme scenarios. Nor do they hold any great optimism regarding our ability to end all wars or sway political outcomes through marches and petitions. Rather, the just-war pacifist begins with a thoroughly realist assumption—that foreign policy is seldom if ever guided by rigorous just-war precepts. It is difficult to imagine what a U.S. foreign policy and military posture guided by just-war principles would look like, so stringent is the tradition. Widespread inability among "Christian realists" to discern the tension, if not outright contradiction, between "realism" and just-war criteria is itself a deadly brand of idealism.

A realistic assessment of U.S. foreign policy since World War II would speak, for example, not of the Niebuhrian "irony" involved in the exercise of U.S. power, but rather of our persistent use of violence in pursuit of "the national interest"—what Martin Luther King Jr. soberly described during the Vietnam era as "the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investments." Realism demands that we pay close attention to the sheer power interests, often cloaked in idealistic rhetoric, underlying the Pentagon's estimated nine hundred military bases and installations in every corner of the globe, our staggering military budgets, and events such as Washington's installation of dictators in countries like Greece, Vietnam, Guatemala, and Iran in the 1950s; its overthrow of democratically elected leaders in Chile and Brazil in the 1960s; its relentless "pacification" campaign in Indochina and "secret" carpet-bombing of Laos and Cambodia in the 1960s and '70s; its "green light" for Indonesia's genocidal invasion and occupation of Catholic-majority East Timor in the '70s; its sponsoring of right-wing death squads in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador to prop up corrupt oligarchies (even as they murdered priests and nuns calling for justice for the poor) from the '50s through the '80s; its channeling of billions of dollars of military aid to Turkey

MAN WALKING A DOG

Let us give
While we live
Bewildered thanks to God for what we have

That isn't in the Prayer—
Bread isn't central air,
And we ourselves are all He's pledged to spare.

But what diverting sights:
The curtains and the lights,
The open windows and the screens on autumn nights;

A Sheltie and a sack
Of groceries in the back
Of an old vehicle, and new tiles in a stack

On a patio—but really, who can say?
Any day
What He has given He can take away.

Our firecrackers spark
Improbably, then flick into the dark,
But His own covenant's as steady and as stark

As an abandoned highway, or the way
He ends the colors when He ends a day.

—Sarah Ruden

Sarah Ruden's most recent book is Paul Among the People *(Image Books). She has translated four books of classical literature (among them the* Aeneid*) and is the author of* Other Places, *a book of poetry.*

and Colombia as they escalated atrocities against their own populations in the '90s; and the invasions, renditions, torture, and assassinations of our new surveillance state in the "war on terror" since 2001.

To say that these facts are not aberrations but windows into the nature of U.S. power is not to say that the policymakers responsible for them have always been motivated by self-consciously Machiavellian considerations. The just-war pacifist is less interested in the personal psychology of leaders than in the institutional constraints, the systemic forces, and the structural pressures under which they operate—pressures that often blind individuals to their own roles within vast complexes of unjustified privilege, violence, and war or threat of war. The president is as incapable of fundamentally altering the character of the empire as the well-meaning CEO of an oil company is capable of turning the corporation—through token philanthropy and gestures of social consciousness, welcome though these may be—into something other than a competitive, extractive, self-interested, and profit-maximizing system.

The just-war pacifist is also keenly aware that even on those rare occasions when the "national interest" happens to coincide with the global common good, humans are unable to contain, control, or foresee the results of the violence they unleash. Many of the wars the United States has waged in the name of "just cause" have ended in crimes against humanity, from the firebombing of Dresden and Tokyo to the free-fire zones of Vietnam. Allegedly "limited" and "proportionate" uses of violence have often led to even greater violence, sometimes decades later, in the form of "blowback." An unsentimental view of history should lead us to a deeper questioning of our moral passivity and complicity in violence—not to shrouding these brutalities of the nation-state in theological or philosophical euphemisms.

According to James Fredericks ("American Innocence: Niebuhr and the Ironies of History," January 24), Obama's tactics in the "war on terror" reveal "the self-conscious, existential irony of a man who knows he must act in history." The existential irony of Obama's policies may be lost on the families of the Yemeni civilians who, according to an October report by Human Rights Watch, were killed "indiscriminately in clear violation of the laws of war" by U.S. drones—just a few of the likely hundreds of innocent persons executed in distant lands, and under a veil of secrecy, since Obama took office. Realism requires that we name these facts for what they are: not "tragedies" but atrocities, ones that would immediately be recognized as such if the missiles were landing in American towns and cities. As Hans Morgenthau wrote in 1966, when scholars enter the realm of politics, they abdicate their role as seekers of truth and come to serve as apologists for power, but the "genuine intellectual tells the world what it doesn't want to hear" and "speaks, in the biblical sense, truth to power"—a view that predictably earned Morgenthau vicious attacks from the Johnson administration. Power, realism tells us, always protects itself.

Finally, just-war pacifists in the Christian tradition remember that in a world of violence and war, the church's primary calling remains that of modeling a radically different kind of action, and of community. Inevitably in the discussion of how to respond to the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons and its other crimes against humanity, the question arises: "What should we do if not strikes?" Such questions assume a very particular "we"—a "we" that possesses all the tools of violence and must decide when and how to use them. They invite us to imagine ourselves equipped with missiles and drones, and to work out our ethics from the position of the state's monopoly on violence. Yet to ask "What should we drone operators do?" or "What should Obama do?"—or even "What should we Americans do?"—is *not* the same as asking "What should we members of the Body of Christ do?" The irony of "Christian realism" is the tragedy of misplaced pronouns.

The church, as Stanley Hauerwas reminds us, does not have a foreign policy or a politics; rather, the church is a politics, confronting the harsh realities of war as an alternative, even subversive presence in the midst of every society and every political order in which it finds itself. Christians must think and act accordingly, bearing creative witness to the New Testament story of Christ's victory over the structures of violence—the "principalities and powers"—and we must do so with absolute realism about the nature of power and violence in the world in which we live. We must strive to create alternative social spaces that meet concrete human needs and transcend all national, ideological, and political differences. We must devote our energies to providing care for—and advocating on behalf of—the weakest and most vulnerable members of society, including refugees and other victims of wars without regard for what side they are on. And we must steadfastly refrain from participating in the violence of the nation-state—even for the sake of noble ideals. If we do on occasion speak in the language of "just war," it can never be our native tongue.

The civil war in Syria has significantly worsened over the past three months, even as it has largely vanished from public discussion in the United States. While the destruction of Assad's chemical weapons under international supervision moves forward, his forces continue to launch indiscriminate attacks on civilians with impunity, using relatively primitive techniques such as "barrel bombs"—explosive-filled drums, rolled out of helicopters—that on December 15 killed an estimated eighty people (including twenty-eight children) in Aleppo. According to rights organizations, opposition groups, many of them radical Islamists, are also committing escalating atrocities, including kidnappings, executions, bombings, and shootings, that rise to the level of crimes against humanity.

The UN foresees that more than three-quarters of the Syrian population will need humanitarian assistance in 2014 and has issued a $6.5-billion aid appeal, the largest in the organization's history. Yet with over 2 million Syrian war refugees to date—a number that could double this year—the *Washington Post* reports that as of last September, the Obama administration had permitted only ninety of them to settle in the United States. It is evidently far easier for our elected officials to consider bombing a country for the greater good of humanity than to welcome foreigners whose homes have been bombed. Under these circumstances, there is much that the church and individual believers can do, and must do, to work for peace. ■

Ronald E. Osborn *is an adjunct professor of international relations at the University of Southern California. He is the author of* Anarchy and Apocalypse: Essays on Faith, Violence and Theodicy *(Cascade Books), and* Death Before the Fall: Biblical Literalism and the Problem of Animal Suffering *(IVP Academic).*

An Unbelieving Age

Nietzsche's Challenge & the Christian Response

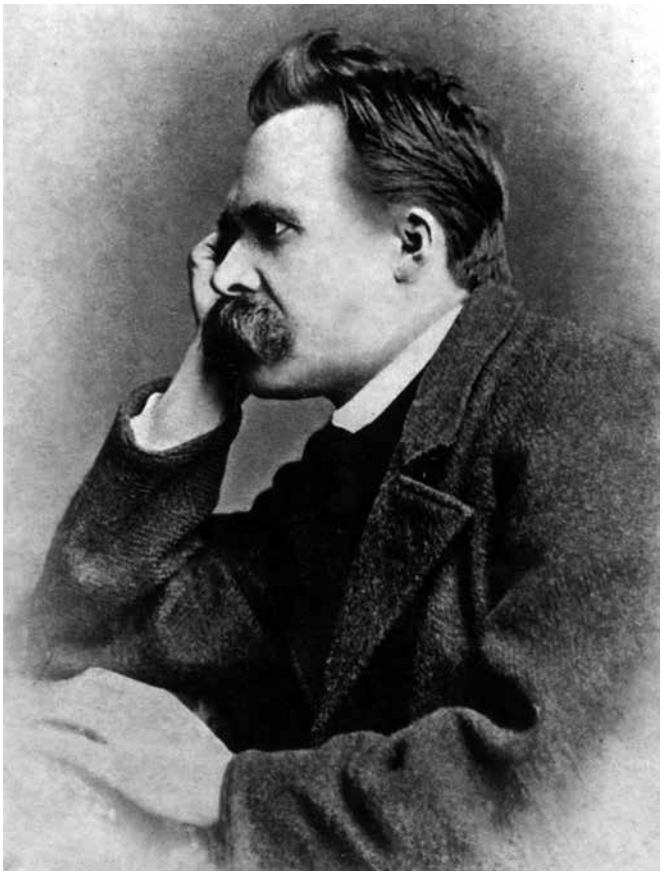
Terry Eagleton

Friedrich Nietzsche has a strong claim to being the first real atheist. Of course there had been unbelievers in abundance before him, but it is Nietzsche above all who confronts the terrifying, exhilarating consequences of "the death of God." As long as God's shoes have been filled by Reason, art, culture, Geist, imagination, the nation, humanity, the state, the People, society, morality, or some other such specious surrogate, the Supreme Being is not quite dead. He may be mortally sick, but he has delegated his affairs to one envoy or another, part of whose task is to convince men and women that there is no cause for alarm, that business will be conducted as usual despite the absence of the proprietor.

What Nietzsche recognizes is that you can get rid of God only if you also do away with innate meaning. The Almighty can survive tragedy, but not absurdity. As long as there appears to be some immanent sense to things, one can always inquire after the source from which it springs. Abolishing given meanings involves destroying the idea of depth, which in turn means rooting out beings like God who take shelter there. Like Oscar Wilde in his wake, Nietzsche is out to replace what he sees as a vacuous depth with a profundity of the surface.

Max Weber comments in his essay "Science as a Vocation" that every theology presupposes that the world has meaning, and that only a plucky few can acknowledge that it does not. The true *Übermensch* (or Overman) in his view is the social scientist, who can confront the blankness of the universe and live without religious consolation. For those who cannot attain this dangerous truth, Weber remarks, "the doors of the old churches are open widely and compassionately." It is a modern-day version of the double-truth thesis: the average citizen may be allowed to live in salutary illusion, while the intelligentsia gaze unflinchingly into the void. One might add that in Weber's view the epitome of life's senselessness is death, which for Christianity is where it is most charged with meaning.

Nietzsche sees that civilization is in the process of ditching divinity while still clinging to religious values, and that this egregious act of bad faith must not go uncontested. You cannot kick away the foundations and expect the building still to stand. The death of God, he argues in *The Gay Science*, is the most momentous event of human history, yet men and women are behaving as though it were no more than a minor readjustment. Of the various artificial respirators on which God has been kept alive, one of the most effective is morality. "It does not follow," Feuerbach anxiously insists, "that goodness, justice and wisdom are chimeras because the existence of God is a chimera." Perhaps not; but in Nietzsche's view it does not follow either that we can dispense with divine authority and continue to conduct our



Friedrich Nietzsche in 1882

PHOTOGRAPH BY GUSTAV-ADOLF SCHULTZE

Terry Eagleton *is the author of more than forty books, including the best-selling* Literary Theory: An Introduction, Why Marx Was Right, *and* How to Read Literature. *This essay is adapted from portions of his new book,* Culture and the Death of God *(Yale, 2014).*

moral business as usual. Our conceptions of truth, virtue, identity, and autonomy, our sense of history as shapely and coherent, all have deep-seated theological roots. It is idle to imagine that they could be torn from these origins and remain intact. Morality must therefore either rethink itself from the ground up, or live on in the chronic bad faith of appealing to sources it knows to be spurious. In the wake of the death of God, there are those who continue to hold that morality is about duty, conscience, and obligation, but who now find themselves bemused about the source of such beliefs. This is not a problem for Christianity—not only because it has faith in such a source, but because it does not believe that morality is primarily about duty, conscience, or obligation in the first place.

Nietzsche speaks scornfully of French freethinkers from Voltaire to Comte as trying to "out-Christian" Christianity with a craven cult of altruism and philanthropy, virtues that are as distasteful to him as pity, compassion, benevolence, and suchlike humanitarian claptrap. He can find nothing in such values but weakness cunningly tricked out as power. These, too, are ways of disavowing God's disappearance. God is indeed dead, and it is we who are his assassins, yet our true crime is less deicide than hypocrisy. Having murdered the Creator in the most spectacular of all Oedipal revolts, we have hidden the body, repressed all memory of the traumatic event, tidied up the scene of the crime and, like Norman Bates in *Psycho,* behave as though we are innocent of the act. Modern secular societies, in other words, have effectively disposed of God but find it morally and politically convenient—even imperative—to behave as though they have not. They do not actually believe in him, but it is still necessary for them to imagine that they do. God is too vital a piece of ideology to be written off, even if it is one that their own profane activities render less and less plausible. To look at the beliefs embodied in their behavior, rather than at what they piously profess, is to recognize that they have no faith in God at all, but it is as though the fact has not yet been brought to their attention. One of Nietzsche's self-appointed tasks is to do precisely that.

If God really has expired, however, this is by no means unqualified good news. If he is dead, then, as Jacques Lacan claims contra Dostoevsky, nothing is permitted, since for one thing there is no one to grant permission. We now have nobody to assume the burden of responsibility but ourselves, whereas having a signed and certified warranty to act as we do is a great assuager of guilt. We may expect, then, that our moral unease will intensify in the wake of God's demise, as angst and *mauvaise foi* tighten their hold on humanity.

Nietzsche's struggle, as Andrew Wernick notes, was not just one of Dionysus against the Crucified, to adopt his own words, but one against Christianity's "enlightened afterlife." The Overman is he who has freed himself from those forms of sham religion known as Nature, Reason, Man, and morality. Only this audacious animal can peer into the abyss of the Real and find in the death of God the birth of a new

species of humanity. As with Christian faith, the only place to begin is with a confession that our hands are steeped in the blood of divinity. Man, too, must be dismantled, insofar as he is modelled on the unity and infinity of the godhead. He is defined so completely by his dependence on his Creator that the two must fall together. There can be no obsequies for the Almighty without a funeral ceremony for humanity as well. The death of God must herald the death of Man, in the sense of the craven, guilt-ridden, dependent creature who bears that name at present. What will replace him is the Overman. Yet in his sovereignty over Nature and lordly self-dependence, the Overman has more than a smack of divinity about him, which means, ironically, that God is not dead after all. What will replace him continues to be an image of him.

That the death of God involves the death of Man, along with the birth of a new form of humanity, is orthodox Christian doctrine, a fact of which Nietzsche seems not to have been aware. The Incarnation is the place where both God and Man undergo a kind of kenosis or self-humbling, symbolized by the self-dispossession of Christ. Only through this tragic self-emptying can a new humanity hope to emerge. In its solidarity with the outcast and afflicted, the Crucifixion is a critique of all hubristic humanism. Only through a confession of loss and failure can the very meaning of power be transfigured in the miracle of resurrection. The death of God is the life of the iconoclast Jesus, who shatters the idolatrous view of Yahweh as irascible despot and shows him up instead as vulnerable flesh and blood.

The absence of God may be occluded by the fetish of Man, but the God who has been disposed of would seem little more than a fetish in the first place. As with William Blake's Urizen or Nobodaddy, he was a convenient way of shielding a humanity eager to be chastised from the intolerable truth that the God of Christianity is friend, lover, and fellow accused, not judge, patriarch, and superego. He is counsel for the defense, not for the prosecution. Moreover, his apparent absence is part of his meaning. The superstitious would see a sign, but the sign of the Father that counts is a crucified body. For Christian faith, the death of God is not a question of his disappearance. On the contrary, it is one of the places where he is most fully present. Jesus is not Man standing in for God. He is a sign that God is incarnate in human frailty and futility.

The superstitious would see a sign, but the sign that counts is a crucified body. For Christian faith, the death of God is not a question of his disappearance. On the contrary, it is one of the places where he is most fully present.

Postmodernism is in many ways a postscript to Nietzsche, though a Nietzsche shorn of the quasi-metaphysical baggage—of the Will to Power, the *Übermensch* and the quasi-teleological tale of how humanity might pass from savagery to moral splendor. It also abandons his tragic vision. It is a post-tragic form of culture—though post-tragic in the sense that Morrissey is post-Mozart. It is not as if it has been hauled through tragedy in order to emerge, suitably transfigured, on the other side. In its eyes, a lack of inherent meaning in reality is not a scandal to be confronted but a fact to be accepted. Whereas modernism experiences the death of God as a trauma, an affront, a source of anguish as well as a cause for celebration, postmodernism does not experience it at all. There is no God-shaped hole at the center of its universe, as there is at the center of Kafka, Beckett, or even Philip Larkin. Indeed, there is no gap in its universe at all.

If postmodern culture is depthless, antitragic, nonlinear, antinuminous, nonfoundational and anti-universalist, suspicious of absolutes and averse to interiority, one might claim that it is genuinely postreligious, as modernism most certainly is not. Most religious thought, for example, posits a universal humanity, since a God who concerned himself with only a particular section of the species, say Bosnians or people over five foot eight inches tall, would appear lacking in the impartial benevolence appropriate to a Supreme Being. There must also be some common ground between ourselves and Abraham for the Hebrew Scriptures to make sense. Postmodernism, however, is notoriously nervous of universals, despite its claim that grand narratives have everywhere disappeared from the earth, or that there are no stable identities to be found, wherever one looks. As a current of thought, it inherits most of those aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy that make for atheism; but since in its streetwise style it rejects the notion of the *Übermensch*, it refuses to smuggle in a new form of divinity to replace the old. Skeptical of the whole concept of a universal humanity, it repudiates Man as well as God, and in doing so refuses the quasi-religious consolations of humanism. In this sense, Nietzsche's warning that the Almighty will rest quiet in his grave only when Man lies alongside him is finally taken seriously.

Nietzsche himself salvages a vision of the active human subject from the ruins of classical humanism. The Overman stamps his image on a world which in itself is mere flux and difference. He also brings his own desires under his dominion

in much the same fashion. In this sense, Michel Foucault's doctrine of self-fashioning in his *History of Sexuality* strikes an authentically Nietzschean note. Yet it is one untypical of poststructuralism and postmodernism as a whole. For them, the flux of reality has now infiltrated the subject to the point where its unity dissolves and its agency is undermined. The postmodern subject, like the *Übermensch*, is clay in its own hands, able to change shape at its own behest; but by the same token it lacks the indomitable will with which Nietzsche's Overman bends reality to his demands. It is aesthetic not in the Nietzschean or Wildean sense of turning oneself into a work of art, but in the Kierkegaardian sense of lacking all unity and principle. Since Man is no longer to be seen primarily as agent or creator, he is no longer in danger of being mistaken for the Supreme Being. He has finally attained maturity, but only at the cost of relinquishing his identity. He is not to be seen as self-determining. The self is no longer coherent enough to be so. This is one way in which postmodernism is post-theological, since it is God above all who is One, and who is the ground of his own being. It follows that if you want to get rid of him, you need to refashion the concept of subjectivity itself, which is just what postmodernism seeks to do.

Perhaps, then, the latter decades of the twentieth century will be seen as the time when the deity was finally put to death. With the advent of postmodern culture, a nostalgia for the numinous is finally banished. It is not so much that there is no redemption as that there is nothing to be redeemed. Religion, to be sure, lives on, since there is more to late modern civilization than postmodernism. Even so, it would not be too much to claim that with the emergence of postmodernism, human history arrives for the first time at an authentic atheism.

One reason why postmodern thought is atheistic is its suspicion of faith. Not just religious faith, but faith as such. It makes the mistake of supposing that all passionate conviction is incipiently dogmatic. Begin with a robust belief in goblins and you end up with the Gulag. Nietzsche had a similar aversion to conviction. It was passion, not belief, that governed the greatest minds. Fixed doctrines spell the death of the transient, provisional, unique, and sensuously specific.

In Nietzsche's eyes, truly noble spirits refuse to be the prisoners of their own principles. Instead, they treat their own most cherished opinions with a certain cavalier detachment, adopting and discarding them at will. It is what Yeats, who like many a modernist felt the influence of Nietzsche, and for whom opinions were fit meat for bank clerks and shopkeepers, called *sprezzatura*. One's beliefs are more like one's manservants, to be hired and fired as the fancy takes you, than like one's bodily organs. They are not to be regarded as constitutive of personal identity, but rather as costumes one can don or doff at will. For the most part, as with kilts and cravats, it is aesthetic considerations that govern the donning and doffing. The left-wing historian A. J. P. Taylor once informed an Oxford Fellowship election committee that he had extreme political views, but held them moderately. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche scorns what he calls the "longing for certainty" of science and rationalism, an itch for epistemological assurance behind which it is not hard to detect a deep-seated anxiety of spirit. In his view, the compulsion to believe is for those who are too timid to exist in the midst of ambiguities without anxiously reaching out for some copper-bottomed truth. The desire for religion is the craving for an authority whose emphatic "thou shalt" will relieve us of our moral and cognitive insecurity. The free spirit, by contrast, is one that has the courage to dispense with "every wish for certainty," supporting itself only by "slender cords and possibilities," yet dancing even so on the verge of the abyss.

In an age in which the concept of certainty smacks of the tyrant and technocrat, a certain agnosticism becomes a virtue. Indeterminacy and undecidability are accounted goods in themselves. Conviction suggests a consistency of self that does not sit easily with the volatile, adaptive subject of advanced capitalism. Besides, too much doctrine is bad for consumption. Beliefs are potentially contentious affairs, which is good neither for business nor for political stability. They are also commercially superfluous. The fervent ideological rhetoric needed to found the system thus fades

as it unfolds. As long as its citizens roll into work, pay their taxes, and refrain from assaulting police officers, they can believe pretty much what they like.

The faithlessness of advanced capitalism is built into its routine practices. It is not primarily a question of the piety or skepticism of its citizens. The marketplace would continue to behave atheistically even if every one of its actors was a born-again Evangelical. Yet God has of course by no means vanished. Consumer capitalism may have scant use for him in practice, but it is still mortgaged to some extent to its own metaphysical heritage. By and large, advanced capitalism remains caught in the state of denial that Nietzsche denounces. The economy may be a rank atheist, but the state that stands guard over it still feels the need to be a true believer. Not, to be sure, necessarily a religious believer, but to subscribe to certain imperishable moral and political truths that cannot simply be derived from the size of the deficit or the unemployment statistics.

In his *Faith of the Faithless*, a title that might be used to characterize a whole current of recent leftist thought, Simon Critchley acknowledges what he sees as the limits of any entirely secularist worldview, and records his doubt that radical politics can be effective without a religious dimension. It is now some on the left, not the right, who look to a religious "supplement" to the political—partly, no doubt, in response to the spiritual vacuity of late capitalism, but also because there are indeed some important affinities between religious and secular notions of faith, hope, justice, community, liberation, and the like. A range of prominent left thinkers, from Badiou, Agamben, and Debray to Derrida, Habermas, and Žižek, have thus turned to questions of theology, to the chagrin or bemusement of some of their acolytes.

There is a dash of pathos, not to speak of a mildly comic touch, in the spectacle of a group of devout materialists speaking in strenuously Protestant terms of the "claims of infinity," "heeding the call," "infinite responsibility," and the like. If Graham Greene's fiction is thronged with reluctant Christians, men and women who would like to be rid of the Almighty but find themselves stuck with him like some lethal addiction, there are also reluctant atheists—thinkers who can sometimes be distinguished from the Archbishop of Canterbury only by the fact that they do not believe in God.

Alongside the leftist fellow travelers, there are also those defenders of capitalism who, troubled by its crassly materialist climate, are out to hijack the religious spirit in order to lend this way of life some sweetness and light. Religious faith, suitably cleansed of its primitive propositions, may figure as a kind of aesthetic supplement to an uncouth social order. Alain de Botton's unwittingly entertaining *Religion for Atheists* is symptomatic of this trend. There are, de Botton argues, "aspects of religious life that could fruitfully be applied to the problems of secular society." One and a half centuries in the wake of Matthew Arnold, de Botton is still wistfully hoping that culture may wrest the baton from religion. "We are unwilling," he writes, "to consider secular culture religiously enough, in other words, as a source of guidance." Religion "teaches us to be polite, to honor one another, to be faithful and sober," as well as instructing us in "the charms of community." Intellectually speaking, religion is pure nonsense; but this is hardly to the point as long as it makes for some much-needed civility, aesthetic charm, social order, and moral edification. A committed atheist like himself, de Botton argues, can therefore still find religion "sporadically interesting, useful, and consoling." Since Christianity requires that one lay down one's life if need be for a stranger, de Botton must have a strange idea of consolation. His notion of faith is not quite that of a prophet who was tortured and executed by the imperial powers for speaking up for justice, and whose followers must be prepared to meet the same fate.

Reluctant atheism has a long history. Machiavelli thought that religious ideas, however vacuous, were a useful means of terrorizing and pacifying the mob. Voltaire feared infecting his own domestic servants with his impiety. Gibbon, one of the most notorious skeptics of all time, considered that the religious doctrines he despised could nonetheless prove socially useful. There is something unpleasantly disingenuous about this entire legacy. "I don't happen to believe myself, but it is politically expedient that you should" is the catchphrase of thinkers supposedly devoted to the integrity of the intellect. One can imagine how they might react to being informed that their own most cherished convictions—civil rights, freedom of speech, democratic government and the like—were of course all nonsense, but politically convenient nonsense, and so not to be scrapped. It took the barefaced audacity of Friedrich Nietzsche to point out that the problem was less the death of God than the bad faith of Man, who in an astonishing act of cognitive dissonance had murdered his Maker but continued to protest that he was still alive. It was thus that men and women failed to see in the divine obsequies an opportunity to remake themselves.

If religious faith were to be released from the burden of furnishing social orders with a set of rationales for their existence, it might be free to rediscover its true purpose as a critique of all such politics. In this sense, its superfluity might prove its salvation. The New Testament has little or nothing to say of responsible citizenship. It is not a "civilized" document at all. It shows no enthusiasm for social consensus. Since it holds that such values are imminently to pass away, it is not greatly taken with standards of civic excellence or codes of good conduct. What it adds to common morality is not some supernatural support, but the grossly inconvenient news that our forms of life must undergo radical dissolution if they are to be reborn as just and compassionate communities. The sign of that dissolution is a solidarity with the poor and powerless. It is here that a new configuration of faith, culture, and politics might be born. ■

Richard Alleva

The Master

REMEMBERING PHILIP SEYMOUR HOFFMAN

The late Philip Seymour Hoffman, who died in February at the age of forty-six, was an actor of genius. In its obituary, the *New York Times* claimed that he "was perhaps the most ambitious and widely admired American actor of his generation." One should add, however, that Hoffman's ambition had to operate within the cramped zone reserved for "character actors." He was disqualified from most of Hollywood's leading-man roles by his looks, which were pudgy, rumpled, and—depending on the role and the cinematography—sometimes sinister or prematurely old. I know it sounds shallow to describe an actor's scope according to his physique, but it's naïve to pretend that sex appeal doesn't make a crucial difference in the way a film career proceeds. (Actresses suffer this typecasting a thousand times more than men do.) Because of his looks, Christian Bale can be either a leading man or a character actor as the occasion demands. He can pack on the pounds for *American Hustle* or starve himself into wraithhood for *The Machinist*, but he also has the option of reverting to his handsome self for romantic roles. Hoffman didn't have that option.

What he had instead was the greatest range of any character actor of his generation. His filmography is stupendous in both its length and its variety. He played smug, slimy creeps in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, *The Big Lebowski*, *Scent of a Woman*, and *Red Dragon*; pathetic losers in *Flawless*, *Nobody's Fool, Boogie Nights*, and *Happiness*; complex, tormented men, equally capable of decency and loathsomeness, in *A Late Quartet*, *Doubt*, *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*, and *Synecdoche, New York*; profane but good-hearted henchmen in *The Ides of March* and *Charlie Wilson's War*; sweet-tempered but baffled nice guys in *Moneyball* and *Magnolia*; and genius writers in *Capote* (which won him an Oscar) and *Almost Famous*. He even played a supervillain bent on world domination, as he did in *Mission Impossible III*. And he could plumb Dostoyevskian depths: the pathetic, frightening, often despicable but oddly patriarchal megalomaniac Lancaster Dodd in *The Master* was, in my opinion, the actor's masterpiece.

I've clumsily sorted these performances into broad categories, but Hoffman did not really play types. His genius individualized even the creeps: the globe-trotting upper-class playboy in *Ripley* was repellent in a way quite different from the slimeball tabloid journalist in *Red Dragon*. And Hoffman's roles differed not only in psychological quality but in length and prominence. In *Capote*, *The Master, Doubt*, and a few others, he had the lead, but often he filled supporting parts, and occasionally he did

CNS PHOTO / MIRAMAX

Hoffman and Amy Adams in Doubt

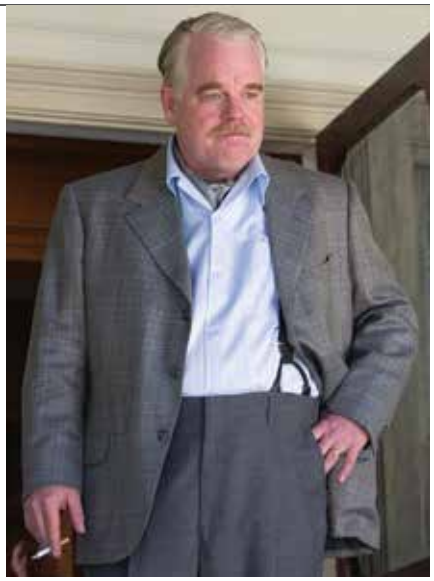
a walk-on that you would miss if you blinked. Director Joel Schumacher had it about right when he said in 2000, "The bad news is that Philip won't be a $25-million star. The good news is that he'll work for the rest of his life."

Because of a heroin addiction, that life turned out to be all too brief. Did some premonition of an early death drive him to cram in as much work as possible, or is that just a retrospective illusion? Just as it's hard not to find an apprehension of mortality in the youthful intensity of Keats's poetry, it will now be hard not to think of Hoffman's busy career as a race against the clock.

Hoffman was born and raised a Catholic. We should probably wait until some (hopefully) perceptive, well-researched biography reveals just how his early religious training affected his art (if it did) but let me venture one tentative suggestion: Catholicism (and non-Calvinistic Protesantism) posits the democracy of the dead, the idea that we are all, as Dickens put it, "fellow travelers to the grave." There is no spiritual elect, and no one is spiritually doomed. We work out our own fates, choice by choice. It's possible that this idea fed Hoffman's hunger to scoop up every role, no matter its size, no matter how sympathetic or repellent, and play it for all it was worth. No actor, of course, can afford to judge the person he or she must inhabit, but a Catholic actor might be especially attuned to whatever is salvageable in a loathsome character, as well as to the spot of vileness in a saint. As David Fear wrote in *Rolling Stone*, "No modern actor was better at making you feel sympathy for…idiots, failures, degenerates, sad sacks, and hangdogs dealt a bum hand by life, even as—no, especially when—he played them with all of their worst qualities front and center." But Hoffman also had a knack for projecting goodness, whether the simple goodness of the nurse in *Magnolia* or the complicated, bristling benevolence of Lester Bangs in *Almost Famous*.

Hoffman's versatility conveyed little of the giddy, let's-dress-up fun that you get from the physical shape-shifting of an Olivier, a Brando, or a Streep. Oh, now and then an almost unnoticeable mustache would appear; the hairline went up and down a bit; a few pounds would be added or subtracted from his stocky frame. (He didn't discover theater until an injury forced him off his high-school wrestling team.) But the real metamorphoses took place in the set of his features and the focus of his eyes. More than any actor I know, Hoffman delineated his characters by the way he looked at the people sharing a scene with him—the differing degrees of attention, affection, suspicion, respect, or contempt. It was as if Hoffman, all too aware that he wasn't eye candy, had determined to cajole the viewer into sharing his character's outlook and opinions. *If you don't like to look at me, then look with me. Get behind my eyes.* This gift could be particularly devastating when the role was ambiguous, possibly sinister. In *Doubt*, for instance, was the priest he played gazing on his charges with true benevolence or with the intentness of a pedophile? We were drawn just close enough to the man to make us feel the beginning of repugnance, but it was an uneasy repugnance, since the priest might yet turn out to be innocent. Hoffman's performance certified the film's title.

Now the man is gone, the career ended. His ongoing artistic quest has been frozen into an oeuvre. One would like to think that the best of that oeuvre expressed what was best in him. If so, how convenient for us, how little comfort for his loved ones. ■



Hoffman in The Master

CNS PHOTO / WEINSTEIN

Melissa M. Matthes

A Nonprophetic Ministry

Military Chaplains and Religious Diversity

Kim Philip Hansen
Palgrave MacMillan, $85, 252 pp.

Kim Hansen's ethnography of chaplains in the U.S. military opens with a memo, sent to the chief of chaplains, explaining the Muslim holiday of Eid, the festival of fast-breaking at the end of Ramadan. The memo provides the relevant dates, suggests ways to accommodate Muslims as they prepare to celebrate, and concludes that "as in the past, a liberal leave policy is recommended." The details are mundane; what is remarkable is the date of the memo—six weeks after September 11, 2001. "While radical Muslims were claiming that America was at war with Islam and right-wing Christians were arguing that we should be," Hansen writes, "the military chaplaincy was quietly demonstrating the truth of the matter: that the United States is a nation deeply committed to religious freedom for everyone."

This study collects over thirty interviews conducted with primarily Navy chaplains in the Southwest. Though its reach is limited by this regionalism, and by the small number of interviews, Hansen manages to include a diverse collection of denominational and religious affiliations, and to explore some of the most compelling conundrums confronting today's military chaplaincy. What constitutes a religion—and who decides? Where is the border between religious expression and proselytizing? How can military chaplains serve a religiously diverse population while maintaining their own theological commitments?

Chaplains are first and foremost members of the military. They wear military uniforms, not the clerical robes of their religious affiliation. And although they are not permitted to carry weapons, and are usually referred to as "Chaplain" rather than by their rank, they are expected to prioritize good order and discipline over theological or denominational allegiances. Nonetheless, military chaplains are protected by the Geneva Conventions, and by denominational endorsing agencies that can adjudicate when the military is perceived to be compromising their religious obligations. According to the Geneva Conventions, chaplains are noncombatants and are afforded special privileges if taken prisoner—for example, they must be allowed to worship and cannot be assigned any labor or tasks beyond ministering to others.

What, then, is the exact relation between chaplains and the military's core mission of fighting and winning wars? Some theologians worry that chaplains are exploited by the military as a way to endorse state-sponsored violence. As Paulette Otis notes in a recent essay cited in *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*, "Spiritually-fit fighters are presumably more capable on the battlefield.... Soldiers who are healthy, emotionally, psychologically as well as physically, are more efficient and effective in the fight." The state, she argues, has appropriated the chaplaincy as a way to authorize its own righteousness. In opposition, in another essay cited in the same issue, Miroslav Volf argues that as the military's role increasingly focuses on peacekeeping and reconciliation, military chaplains can function as agents of reconciliation—their understanding of religious teachings, rituals, and practices giving them more credibility with local religious leaders and helping them bridge differences and ameliorate conflicts.

Hansen tentatively explores the place of theology among chaplains by asking, "Why don't military leaders seem to fear prophetic criticism from their chaplains?" Chaplains, he writes by way of an answer, "understand that the prophetic voice, whether grounded in civil religion or religion proper, is muted by the necessary depoliticization of the professional officer corps. Chaplains may

CNS PHOTO / GREGORY A. SHEMITZ

A chaplain celebrates Mass at West Point Military Academy.

also calculate that in times of controversy and peril, 'their' sailors and marines will need them more than ever and that they can do more good devoting their time to serving them than to engaging in politics." Here, Hansen assumes that "religion" and "politics" are clearly distinct, and that religion addresses the "private and emotional needs" of the flock rather than the social and cultural realities around them. This distinction is not fully persuasive. How, for instance, amid the theological and political controversies regarding the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," can one separate the theological from the political? How to know whether that separation is what is required—whether it is just, or responsive to either one's faith or one's party affiliation?

Overall, it is difficult not to join Hansen in concluding that most members of the chaplaincy have implicitly accepted the superiority of state authority over church authority, and that "on questions of war and peace, faith and violence, chaplains are either unwilling or unable to effectively challenge the military's definitions of the situation." I am reminded of a quip by Stanley Hauerwas to the effect that if Christians were truly Christian, the U.S. military would be more afraid of Christian soldiers than of gay ones. It is a rather sad reminder of how gutless much of Christianity has become that it can be so readily appropriated and accommodated by a quintessentially bureaucratic and rigid institution.

Nevertheless, this book's analysis of the military chaplaincy frequently reveals religious sensibilities that are robust and flourishing. Hansen is particularly adroit at detailing the ways in which military chaplains negotiate the difference between proselytizing and witnessing. Where proselytizing is often associated with "stealing sheep from other chaplains' flock," Hansen notes that "there is no prohibition against witnessing," since witnessing "entails just the expression of my religious beliefs and an invitation, not for people to assume my beliefs, but an invitation for people to receive Jesus Christ as he is portrayed through Holy Scriptures."

Despite the powerful example of religious pluralism with which Hansen begins his book, dilemmas and tensions persist in the military chaplaincy. The most obvious is the tension between the Constitution's anti-establishment clause and the right to religious freedom and expression. Does the salaried employment of chaplains violate the anti-establishment clause? When command is implicitly sanctioning religious practices, are those practices state-sponsored? Are they covertly coercive? On the other hand, how much religious expression and accommodation must the military effect in order to fulfill the promise of religious freedom? And to what extent must chaplains facilitate beliefs and practices with which they radically disagree?

Several interviews take up this last question. As one chaplain jokes, "If a sailor or marine wants to worship green frogs on flat rocks, I'll get him the flat rocks, but I'm not leading the worship service." Of course, some tensions are more critical—and questions more confusing—when it comes to facilitating the practices of Satanists, white-supremacist churches, or even Wiccans. For instance, does the use of shared sacred spaces desecrate the space if white supremacist church members use it? Primarily, chaplains fall back on a broad use of "good order and discipline": if a practice or worship is perceived to threaten good military order and discipline, the chaplain is authorized to prohibit it. On many occasions this authorization has given chaplains rather wide latitude, including on one occasion enabling them to prohibit a member of the Nation of Islam from preaching that America is an evil empire.

Still, as some chaplains note, it may actually be easier to explore new religions in the military than it is in civilian life. "It gives people more opportunity," remarks one. "If you're in Grand Forks, North Dakota, and you want to become a Wiccan, and you tell your boss at Safeway, he'll look at you like 'Are you nuts?'" Not in the U.S. military. "We have an office," the chaplain continues, "and officers whose job it is to make sure this stuff happens."

But "making sure stuff happens" can be tricky. The motto for the military chaplaincy is "cooperation without compromise": chaplains are expected to look for what they have in common with other religions, but not to compromise their own religious beliefs or ignore the requirements of their own faith groups. For example, in 2011, prior to the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," twenty-one Christian endorsing agencies, concerned that the repeal would require facilitating same-sex marriages, asked the military to adopt "broad, clear and strong protections for conscience." Although an additional clause was not provided, the Department of Defense made considerable effort to insure that chaplains were not required to violate their conscience, even as they adhered to military policy regarding the right of homosexuals to serve.

Many of the chaplains in Hansen's study complain that the military's commitment to religious pluralism—the effort to include everyone and be attentive to the diversity of beliefs—sometimes made them feel they were practicing "religion lite," offering "the lowest spiritual denominator with the loss of theological particularity and perhaps of truth." Christian chaplains seem the most likely to feel the restraints. "Rabbis are able to pray in their faith tradition, Muslims are able to pray in their faith traditions, and Christian are very often not allowed to pray in our faith traditions," complains one. "We can't say Jesus, and they can say Allah until the cows come home." (Indeed, court cases have taken up the issue of whether the military can tell chaplains how to pray, including a 2006 case in which a Navy chaplain was required to say "Lord" rather than "Jesus" when he prayed outside the military chapel; though he was discharged for his refusal, Congress eventually overturned the policy requiring the seeming oxymoron of "nonsectarian prayers" at public military events.) Other chaplains in Hansen's study, however, insist that religious pluralism actually helps them grow in their own faith traditions. Some feel more motivated to understand the particularities of their own traditions; as one chaplain notes, "It forced me to make sure I know what I believe."

The military chaplaincy serves many functions. As Hansen argues, it provides a setting for moral dramas "in which we act out our understandings of who we are and how we ought to live." As such, it embodies some of what is best about contemporary American religious life—as well as some of its most vexing paradoxes. That the military chaplaincy is nearly as old as the republic itself augurs well for its continuance. Yet it is also clear that the current turbulence churning in the relationship between religion and the state will continue to be fought and negotiated in this vital military institution. ■

Melissa M. Matthes *is an associate professor of political science at the United States Coast Guard Academy.*

Robert K. Landers

Reluctant Revolutionaries

Our Lives, Our Fortunes and Our Sacred Honor

The Forging of American Independence, 1774–1776

Richard R. Beeman

Basic Books, $29.99, 492 pp.

In October 1774, John Dickinson of Pennsylvania composed the final draft of the First Continental Congress's petition to the king, pleading with him to restore the rights Americans had long possessed. Dickinson, a wealthy lawyer, had gained renown with *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*, a widely-read series of essays written in 1767–68 in response to the Townshend Duties. The essays argue that Parliament had no constitutional right to raise revenue by taxing the colonies. In the petition to the king, Dickinson combined a strong indictment of the king's "designing" ministers for their "most desperate and irritating projects of Oppression," with fulsome expressions of affection for George III himself. Like most other American colonists, Dickinson was not eager to break with his king and country.

To lawyer John Adams of Massachusetts, who would be perpetually at odds with Dickinson from this moment on, the appeal was too submissive. But to almost all the other delegates at the Congress, the rhetoric of loyalty and affection rang true. Endorsed by the Congress, the petition was "a nearly pitch-perfect reflection of the divided state of mind of the vast majority of American colonists in the fall of 1774," writes historian Richard R. Beeman in *Our Lives, Our Fortunes and Our Sacred Honor*.

The appeal did not sway King George III, who in January 1775 sent it on to the House of Commons without even acknowledging that he had read it. As events unfolded, Americans would choose Adams's militant path, not Dickinson's moderate one. Yet to dismiss as unrealistic the efforts of Dickinson and others for an honorable reconciliation with the mother country, Beeman notes, would be to ignore the revolution's "contingent nature."

Dickinson—who refused to sign the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and so experienced a decline in his reputation—emerges from Beeman's splendid history of the First and Second Continental Congresses as a hero nonetheless: principled, resolute, and patriotic. By July 1776, Dickinson finally had "given up any hope that the British would come around to accept the righteousness of America's constitutional position," Beeman says, but he argued that it would be imprudent to declare independence and rush into full-scale war without first getting "firm assurance from the French of their aid to the cause."

Recognizing that the Congress should speak with one voice, however, Dickinson on July 2 abstained from the vote on independence. Then, immediately after the vote, he went to command one of Philadelphia's militia battalions, leading it to Elizabethtown, New Jersey, "to do battle with the British." Even the antagonistic John Adams, according to his biographer David McCullough, was impressed, telling his wife that "Mr. Dickinson's alacrity and spirit certainly becomes his character and sets a fine example." (Adams himself, meanwhile, desiring "to 'leave the War to be conducted by others' and complaining about being 'weary, thoroughly weary,'" intended to return home as soon as possible, Beeman pointedly observes.)

Another figure who Beeman believes has received less respect than he deserves is Dickinson's fellow Pennsylvanian (and rival) Joseph Galloway. In late September 1774, more than three weeks after the First Continental Congress opened, the haughty future Loyalist proposed a Plan of Union, featuring a Grand Council of representatives (chosen by the colonial legislatures) that would be a branch of Parliament, presided over by a

Joseph Galloway

DRAWING BY THOMAS EMMET, 1885

president-general appointed by the king.

In all the contentious years since the 1765 Stamp Act, Beeman says, Galloway's Plan of Union was "the single most serious effort…at finding a means of giving Americans at least a portion of the [parliamentary] representation that they were demanding." But Congress, in effect, rejected his proposal—though by only a single (colony's) vote! Left dejected and disgruntled by the plan's defeat, Galloway declined to serve in the Second Continental Congress. After independence was declared, he tried, "unsuccessfully, to mobilize the American colonists into a Loyalist army," then, in 1778, fled with his daughter to England.

In the eighteenth century, Beeman notes, the term *congress* "signified a meeting of representatives…for a limited purpose of formulating a common position on specific issues." But the Continental Congress, as he highlights, underwent a remarkable evolution: from a mere debating society into a legitimate governmental body.

In October 1774, shortly before endorsing Dickinson's petition to the king and adjourning, the First Continental Congress made the "momentous decision" to adopt Articles of Association. These bound "all of the people of the 'united colonies,' not just a small group of merchants in a few seaport cities" as in previous protests, to adhere to a trade boycott against Britain, and directed every county, city, and town to elect committees to enforce it. This helped turn resistance to British policies into a "grassroots movement," Beeman writes, and ultimately enabled the revolution to receive broad popular support.

By the time the Second Continental Congress convened in May 1775, the resonant shots had been fired in Lexington and Concord. The Congress thus came not only to be wielding legislative and executive powers, but to be running a war with the British for more than a year *before* the Declaration of Independence. Even so, and despite the king's rejection of the Congress's October petition, Dickinson and many other delegates continued to hope for reconciliation with Britain.

Outside the Congress, however, popular opinion in the colonies was growing more militant—and continued to do so in the succeeding months. "From Lexington and Concord to Bunker Hill to expanded military conflict in New England, Canada, and, by the end of the year, Virginia—more and more Americans found themselves at war," Beeman writes.

In August 1775, not long before refusing even to look at the new "Olive Branch Petition," the final conciliatory appeal from Dickinson and the Congress, King George III issued a proclamation declaring that the colonies were now in a state of "open and avowed rebellion." Word of the king's actions did not reach members of the Congress until November. The advocates of "moderation" among them were left "with precious little ground on which to stand," Beeman observes. And yet, as late as December, "many of America's political

leaders, both within the Congress and in the various colonial legislatures, were doing everything they could to avoid the last resort of independence."

In his August proclamation, the king had expressed what Beeman calls "the common, but mistaken, belief" that the cause of the crisis was that "many of our subjects in divers Parts of Our Colonies" had been "misled by dangerous and ill-designing Men." Revolutions, Beeman says, are not brought about "simply through the will of a small cadre of political leaders. They can only be successful if they gain the broad, active support of the people at large. For such support to happen, an organizational structure is needed that mobilizes and channels the popular will"—which is what Congress's Association provided.

That may be so, but it is certainly possible for a small band of "dangerous and ill-designing Men" to mislead people and to affect—if not by themselves alone effect—a revolution. Sam Adams, John Adams's firebrand cousin, and other Boston radicals orchestrated the Boston Tea Party, and the mob's illegal destruction of valuable property that December night in 1773 so infuriated the British that they imposed the so-called Coercive Acts. Previously, the British had been inclined to appease the American protesters, as in the repeal of the 1765 Stamp Act and the lifting in 1770 of all the Townshend Duties save the modest tax on tea. But now the British had had enough. Had Adams and his band not carried out this destruction, had the British not been so provoked into intransigence, and had what Beeman calls "the turning point" not been reached, would the revolution have been averted? It's an unanswerable question.

But here's an answerable one: Should the general reader opt for Beeman's excellent work or for John Ferling's superb recent narrative history, *Independence: The Struggle to Set America Free*? The correct answer: Read them both! ■

Robert K. Landers *is the author of* An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell *(Encounter).*

Paul Lakeland

Born-Again Fiction

Life After Life

Kate Atkinson
Little, Brown and Co., $18, 560 pp.

If it is only at its end that a life becomes possessed of shape and definition, that it can be seen in terms of achievement and happiness or the lack of it, then whatever final form it will seem to have taken will be mostly a product of accident. What if things had been different? What if the weather had prevented the doctor from arriving in time to aid a difficult birth? What if I had chosen a different college and never met the love of my life? What if she had? A tiny shift—the fabled flutter of a butterfly's wings—and everything is changed.

Life After Life, Kate Atkinson's latest novel, explores the "what ifs?" of a life. Ursula Todd, born in England in 1910, dies repeatedly through the novel: first at birth, again at sea, again off a rooftop, again of the Spanish influenza, again in Nazi Germany, and again in many and various other ways that it would spoil the delight of the story to list. But she is also born again—or, rather, she both dies and is saved from those deaths by minute shifts of circumstance. Just the way life is, except that we don't get to see how our lives would have developed if things had been just a tiny bit different.

Those familiar with Atkinson's earlier work, especially the four Jackson Brodie novels, will know how often coincidence figures in her books. In *Case Histories,* the first Brodie novel, a character mulls over the wish she would hope her fairy godmother might grant and knows what she would ask for: "She would ask to go back to the beginning of her life and start all over again." And *One Good Turn* is built around a single coincidence, though Brodie dismisses coincidence as "just an explanation waiting to happen." In all of Atkinson's work, lives and histories interact in ways that seem extraordinary at times, and yet we know that real lives often revolve around such chance occurrences. In the Brodie novels, everything hinges on the coincidence of individuals in one event, and the story moves out from that event, following the individuals until their lives wrap around together into a loose kind of denouement.

In *Life After Life*, Atkinson folds coincidence and a kind of Borges-like fantasy into the framework of a classic English country-house novel. The people we meet are right out of the pages of Virginia Woolf or E. M. Forster, solid middle-class English types like those

Kate Atkinson

EUAN MILES

leading with their stiff upper lips in the classic World War II propaganda movie *Mrs. Miniver*. Both world wars figure in this novel, though it begins in the Edwardian era and ends in—or, more correctly, reaches—1967. As Ursula says, "Memories are sometimes in the future," and the brief glance at the mid-'60s doesn't seem half as alive or real as the more than two hundred pages devoted to the London Blitz of the early 1940s. In fact, this is the best fictional depiction of life in the Blitz that I have ever come across, not excepting the fine presentation in Henry Green's *Caught*. Life in wartime London makes an obvious scenario for Atkinson, since living or dying depended on the capriciousness of the bombs and just where you were standing when they hit.

Atkinson's purpose is not so much to depict the curiosity of one life lived over and over as to suggest that all lives are a bit like this, that accident and coincidence are the warp and weft of a fabric upon which a person paints a design called "my life." This is also true of the realist novelist, whose task is to fashion a story out of mostly unlinked events. Because she explores many options for her central character, Atkinson disposes of any suggestion of fate or providence. There is only luck, good and bad. The maid goes to the fair in London and returns with a deadly disease, which is passed on to a child, who dies. Or the maid trips and sprains an ankle and cannot go to the fair, so the child lives, at least for now.

In *Howards End* or *Middlemarch* or *To the Lighthouse*, accidents, illnesses, murders, and natural deaths provide the pathos and much of the tension of realist fiction. These events proliferate in L*ife After Life* as well, but the tension is not present, at least not once we pick up on the fact that every death will be countermanded. Or perhaps it's just a different kind of tension. Forster famously said that a novel proceeds "and then, and then, and then." Not so here, where it's more a matter of "and then, and then… and then again." Every event is a kind of cliffhanger, and we wonder if it will stand. Maybe the blind alleys that end in deaths are dreams from which Ursula and we will awake. Or perhaps indeed they are rejected efforts of the novelist's art. Did Atkinson decide to incorporate somehow at least a few of the false starts that are inevitable in creative writing? Is *Life After Life* a novel in which nothing is scrapped, where even the dead ends find a place?

At one point Ursula tells her younger brother Teddy that "you just have to get on with life" because "we only have one after all." Ironic, coming as it does toward the close of the book, but Teddy counters with the thought, "What if we had the chance to do it again and again…until we finally did get it right? Wouldn't that be wonderful?" Wonderful it would be, though getting it right doesn't seem to be the point. ■

Paul Lakeland *is the Aloysius P. Kelley, SJ, Professor of Catholic Studies at Fairfield University.*

Paola Bernardini

Faith-Based Persecution

Christianophobia
A Faith Under Attack
Rupert Shortt
Eerdmans, $26, 328 pp.

In their recent study on religious demographics, "Christianity 2011: Martyrs and the Resurgence of Religion," David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnston estimate that one hundred thousand Christians are killed every year. That figure does not include those who survive as "victims of unprovoked violence" because of their religious beliefs. Those threatened by such violence are at the center of Rupert Shortt's new book, *Christianophobia*. The exact number of such victims remains contested, but Shortt relies on a World Evangelical Alliance report that claims about 200 million Christians around the world "are now under threat."

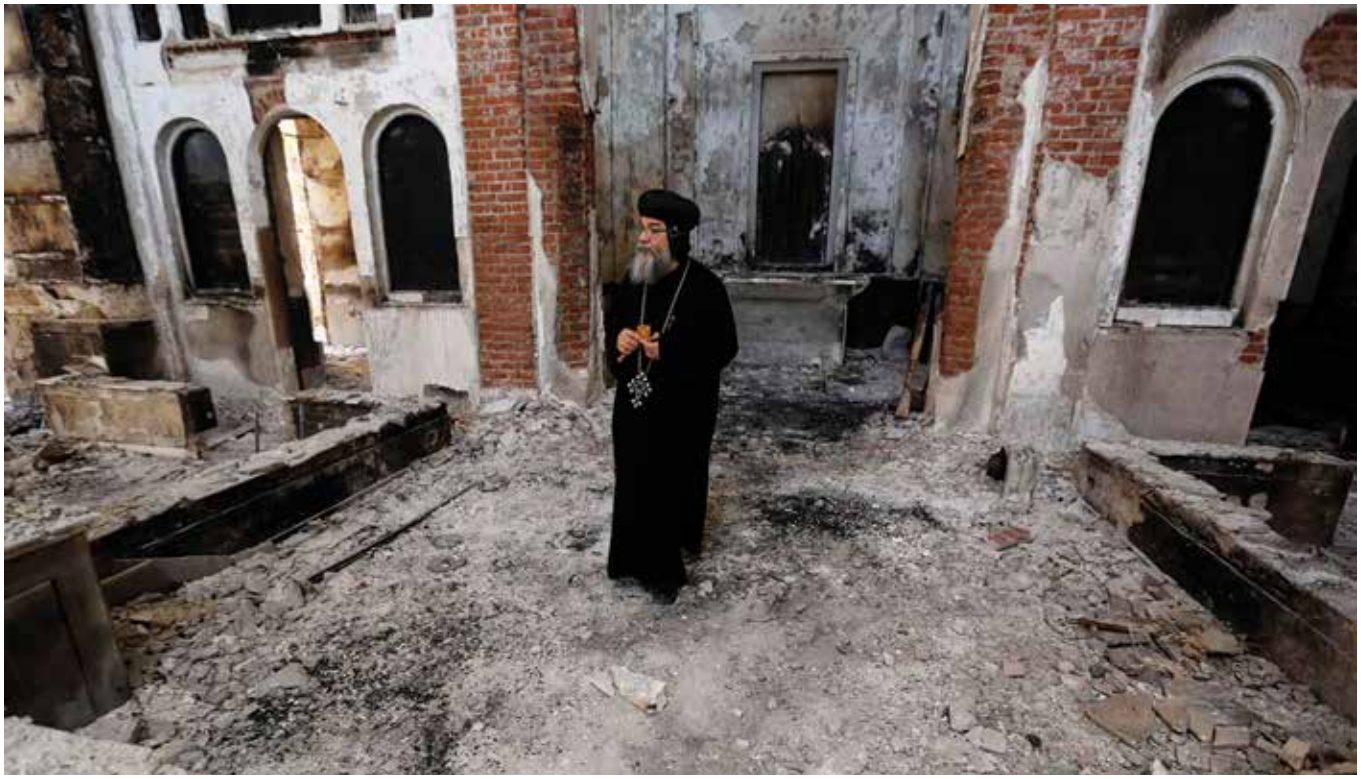
What is not contested is that such persecution often triggers a mass exodus from places where Christians had lived for centuries, such as Palestine, and Egypt, where last August one hundred twenty Coptic families fled their village following anti-Christian violence. And when victims of persecution stay, they are either killed or made miserable.

Research for this book took Shortt to "Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia to meet people who have lost their loved ones, homes, livelihoods or career prospects because of their faith." Of the many stories he tells, particularly striking are the testimony of an Iraqi woman who saw both her sons fall "by the altar" at Our Lady of Deliverance Catholic Church, in Baghdad; the courage of an Evangelical pastor who was beheaded in northeastern Nigeria for refusing to convert to Islam; the abuse of a Christian woman "repeatedly beaten and nearly suffocated," then sentenced to four years in Kyo-hwa-so prison, because she refused to report her fellow Christian friends to the North Korean regime.

The book's value lies not only in the rich personal testimonies, but also in the clearing away of persistent stereotypes and misconceptions. Foremost among those is the idea that religions—especially Islam—are the source of this persecution.

As the author explains, a good deal of anti-Christian prejudice and violence has nothing to do with militant Islam or with religious extremism. Communist and post-Communist regimes in China, Cuba, and Vietnam all notoriously persecuted missionaries, high-ranking clergy, and laity. The establishment viewed religious authorities as a threat because they supported a "more open society," which led them to speak out against their oppressive governments.

Shortt is careful not to suggest that religious fervor naturally leads to terrorism. In many countries, he points out, Christians are persecuted by just a few religious extremists. Indeed, many religious believers risk their lives in order to condemn attacks on members of other faiths. For example, the Muslim gov-



CNS PHOTO / LOUAFI LARBI, REUTERS

A Coptic Orthodox bishop surveys damage at church in Minya, Egypt.

ernor of Punjab, Salmaan Taseer, was murdered on January 4, 2011, by one of his bodyguards, because of his support for a young Christian woman "sent to prison for alleged blasphemy in 2009." What's more, Shortt acknowledges that religious extremists' attacks are sometimes motivated by perceived and actual political injustices perpetrated by "Christian" powers—for example, the invasion of Iraq.

While Shortt does not overlook persecutions suffered by other religious minorities, such as the Sunni Muslims, the Jews of Iran, the Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs in Pakistan, he mentions them only in passing, providing little data and few personal accounts. That may be because of the author's concern about what he sees as an increasing number of Christian persecutions. But persecutions of other religious minorities are also on the rise. For example, according to the UN, the Muslim Rohingya people of Myanmar (Burma) are now one of the most persecuted minorities in the world. Since 1978, more than three hundred thousand Rohingya people have fled the country in order to escape the Burmese junta. Another example: the Buddhist monks and minorities of Bangladesh, whose houses and temples are often razed by mobs and whose lives are threatened by the bloody campaigns of Islamist groups. In fact, the Pew Forum reported in 2010 that some 75 percent of the world's population inhabits countries that deny religious freedom.

Given the global nature of religious persecutions, perhaps Shortt's book should have been called *Religiophobia: Faiths Under Attack*. Taking a broader view of religious persecution might bring his admirable concern for the suffering of minorities into closer alignment with the Gospel call to love one's neighbor as oneself—no matter his religion. ■

Paola Bernardini *is associate director for Research of Contending Modernities, a program at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame.*

Commonweal welcomes letters to the editor. Tell us what you think. letters@commonwealmagazine.org

LETTERS continued from page 4

was imagined in the fourth century and dealt with in our time.

EUGENE C. BIANCHI
Athens, Ga.

COVENANTS OLD & NEW

Steven Englund and his respondents brilliantly pushed us to consider the most knotty of issues in Catholic-Jewish dialogue: our respective views on Jesus.

A further perspective, humbly trying to discern the workings of God in human history, might enrich our understanding of Christian-Jewish relations. The divine plan, from Abraham through the prophets, was somehow to bring the nations to the God of Israel. Through Jesus of Nazareth and his Jewish movement and then the Jewish-Gentile early church, the latter becoming notably inviting to Gentiles in the Roman and Persian worlds, this plan was accomplished. Only a minority of Jews in Judea and Galilee and in the diaspora needed to follow Jesus as the Christ for this to happen. Indeed, if most of the Jewish nation had become adherents of the Jesus movement—a very unlikely development—the resulting religious-ethnic community might have appeared to be just another national religion with little appeal to Gentiles. The establishment of Gentile Christianity as a fulfillment of God's covenant with Israel for the nations and the emergence of rabbinic Judaism as a direct development of God's covenant with the Jewish people might both be a positive realization of God's design.

Any official Christian effort toward "conversion of the Jews" (as distinct from a welcoming of individuals on a personal basis into Christ's church) can only be seen by Jews, especially in the shadow of centuries of Christian hostility, as an assault on the very survival of the Jewish people, however lovingly such efforts might be intended. Catholics do believe that God's new covenant in Christ can be the fulfillment of any and all of God's other ways of relating to the human race, but whether that fulfillment need be realized within human history, now or ever, in particular for a people with their own still valid covenant with that same God, remains open to question.

If the continued existence of God's covenant with the Jewish people alongside God's wider covenant through Christ is indeed God's will and way, then we might even have an obligation as Christians, for positive reasons, to respect and support the distinct existence of the Jewish people, lest we "find ourselves fighting against God" (Acts 5:39), which was Gamaliel's caution to the Sanhedrin against trying to stamp out the nascent Jesus movement.

ROBERT J. O'DONNELL, CSP
Berkeley, Calif.

IS HE RISEN?

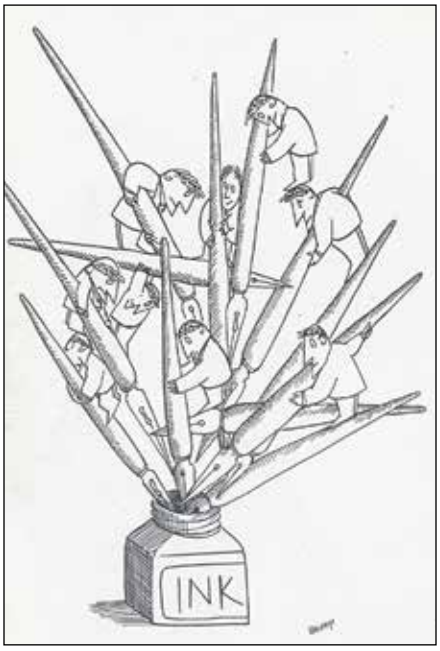
The cover of your February 21 issue asks: "Who Do You Say That I Am? Why Jewish-Catholic dialogue can't avoid the question." But none of the authors who commented on Steven Englund's essay noted that the central feature of the Gospel (the Good News) is the *resurrection* of Jesus. The question, it seems to me, should be: What is your view of the Christian proclamation that Jesus was executed and then was raised from the dead by the God of Israel? Is that proclamation tenable? Did what it proclaims really happen or is it a myth?

How are we to take the claim of Peter et al. that they were eye witnesses to Jesus after his resurrection—they claim that they saw him, touched him, and spoke with him?

As Paul says, if Christ is not risen, then our belief is useless. Christianity caught on because of what the apostles and Paul announced and the result that their announcement had on people. If Jesus was actually raised from the dead by God, then claims that he is the Messiah would seem to have some weight. If he is not, then the world should pay attention to other religions.

Jesus was a Jew, as were his disciples. They saw Jesus as first-century Jews. Were they deluded? Did they invent resurrection as a psychological reaction to his death? Or did the God of Israel truly raise Jesus from the dead?

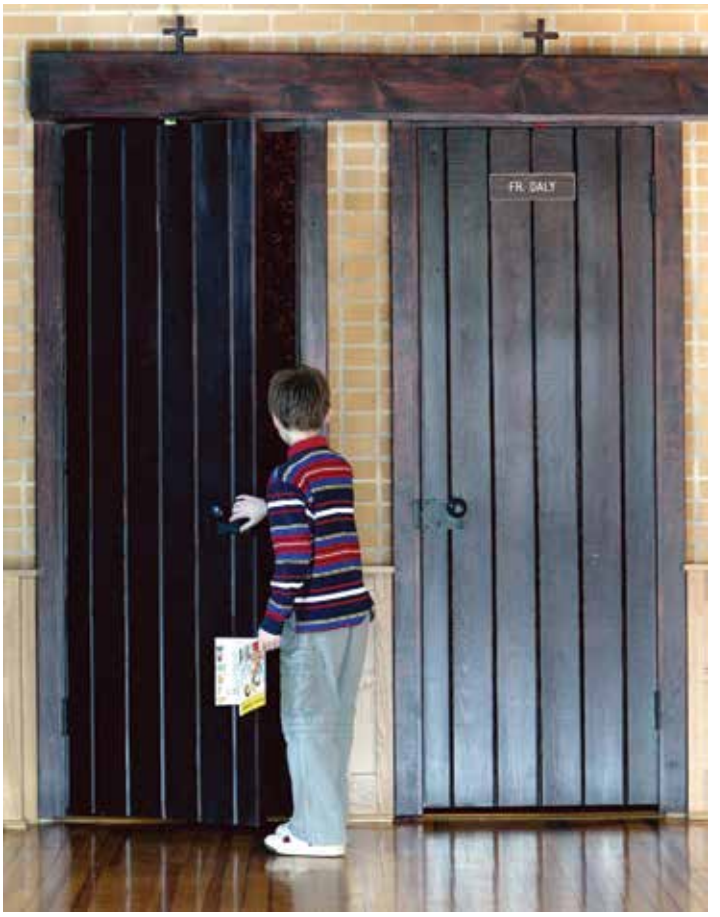
RICHARD J. LOHKAMP
Moorestown, N.J.



VALERRY

Near Occasion

Dominic Preziosi



CNS PHOTO / BOB ROLLER

Who knows why we like the words and phrases we do? My fifth-grade daughter recently copped to a special fondness for "adhesive," while my high school–age son has been spitting out "debacle" with contemptuous abandon. For a very long time I've been drawn to the compound "near occasion." Maybe a linguist or brain specialist could offer a scientific explanation for the general phenomenon, but in my specific case I trace it to a youthful encounter in face-to-face confession.

The pastor was a big, gruff man who had his own way with the language. The assistants and curates might mewl, wheeze, or drone their way through homilies, but he *talked*, elbow propped on the lectern as he made eye contact with his parishioners, his words—some elegant, some coarse, all of them powerfully apt—hitting their targets. My parents once invited him to dinner, and he kept me and my brothers rapt with vivid stories of his missionary years in Brazil, of the UFOs he claimed to have seen and the "vicious green" hallucinogenic potions the villagers drank from plastic gallon bottles. He commanded awe, but it was awe's close cousin fear I felt more acutely one Lenten afternoon in the sacristy, when he invited me to sit in a chair facing his and confess my sins.

I dutifully commenced the familiar recitation, increasingly aware of what seemed like his wandering attention; his gaze appeared to drift to something over my left shoulder. When I'd finished, he asked distractedly if I knew the Act of Contrition. I didn't, I admitted (I was probably nine or ten at the time). "Why?" I asked, drymouthed, certain I was in trouble. "Should I?" He took a deep breath and intoned, as if to lead me: "Oh my God." "Oh my God," I repeated.

Then…nothing. Half a minute passed in silence, after which, and without explanation, I received the familiar instructions for my penance, followed by a parting blessing. Of course, I felt nothing but guilt—as if I'd let him down by not knowing the prayer. So I made sure to learn it. And in time, for whatever reason, its closing infinitive with that nested pairing came to be what resonated most: "…to avoid the near occasion of sin."

Leave aside the theological meanings that can be teased from that collection of words; it was the combination of sound and image that made their mark on me. Many artists and writers, not necessarily religious, speak of the influence of religious language on their work. In a recent NPR interview, Bruce Springsteen attributed his ability to conjure imagery and emotion partly to his "[indoctrination] in religious language…every single morning for the first eight years of my schooling…. It was, of course, distorted, and screwed me up terribly, but at the same time, it made for good writing. And it was a wonderful source of metaphor when you went to write about the world and about your inner life."

I didn't go to Catholic school, but all those Masses and prayers and Saturday evenings in the confessional must have done their number on me in terms of how I hear and read and use the language (even if I can't say they screwed me up). The words and phrases of the liturgy and of prayer still seem to influence the rhythm and arrangement of the words I speak and write. "Fountain of all holiness." "Fruit of thy womb." "As we wait in joyful hope." "Go now and sin no more." Decades later I'm still attuned to their echoes, whether encountered in the common language of the everyday or in the songs I hear or the books I read. Happening on the words "they will regret not what they have done, will only regret what they failed to do" in a short story by George Saunders, I thought: Yes, it's just where the protagonist would summon a version of a line from the Confiteor, precisely because it's unconscious and out of context.

Flannery O'Connor, famously receptive to the mysterious visitations of language and image, provides an especially evocative pairing in the opening pages of her prayer journal: "I do not know you, God, because I am in the way. Please help me to push myself aside." Metaphor isn't just an ornament for prayer; rather, metaphor births prayer. I haven't been able to get it out of my head. Yet in terms of plain appeal, "near occasion" retains pride of place. I've been thinking it would make a good novel or short story title, or even work as the name of a band. Or perhaps the title of a brief essay on the last page of a magazine. ■

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

MARCH 18, 2014 | 7:00 P.M.

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY MARYLAND

The FRANCIS FACTOR

Join Cardinal Seán O'Malley, Archbishop of Boston and member of the Pope's Advisory Council of Cardinals, Fr. Thomas Rosica of Salt & Light TV, Helen Alvaré, Catholic author and law professor, Fr. Matt Malone, Editor-in-Chief of America magazine, and Kerry Robinson, Exec. Dir. of the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management, for a discussion of *The Francis Factor*, marking the one-year anniversary of the election of Pope Francis.

For more information and to request tickets, visit www.archbalt.org

ARCHDIOCESE OF BALTIMORE
225 Years
1789 ★ 2014

WORLD CATHOLICISM WEEK 2014

APRIL 7–11

DEPAUL UNIVERSITY

APRIL 7-9

"Scattered & Gathered:" Catholics in Diaspora

Daniel Cardinal DiNardo—Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants
Philip Jenkins—Author, *The Lost History of Christianity & Jesus Wars*
Lamin Sanneh— Author, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West*

APRIL 10

Spiritual Tools for a Secular World

Tim Muldoon—Author, *The Ignatian Workout;* columnist, Catholic portal, Patheos.com
Terry Nelson-Johnson—Resident Theologian, Old St. Patrick's Church (Chicago)
Katie Brick—Director, Office of Religious Diversity, DePaul University

APRIL 11

Sweatshops & Sacraments: Catholic Approaches to the Apparel Industry

Rev. Anthony O'Connor—Founder of socially-responsible clothing, Goods of Conscience™
Scott Kelley—Coauthor, *Alleviating Poverty Through Profitable Partnerships*
Christie Klimas—Researcher funded by EPA's People, Prosperity & the Planet Program

FOR MORE INFORMATION
(773) 325-4158
cwcit@depaul.edu
http://worldcath2014.depaul.edu

ORGANIZED BY: Center for World Catholicism & Intercultural Theology