A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

Commonweal

DECEMBER 15, 2017

$3.95 US/$4.50 CAN

www.commonwealmagazine.org

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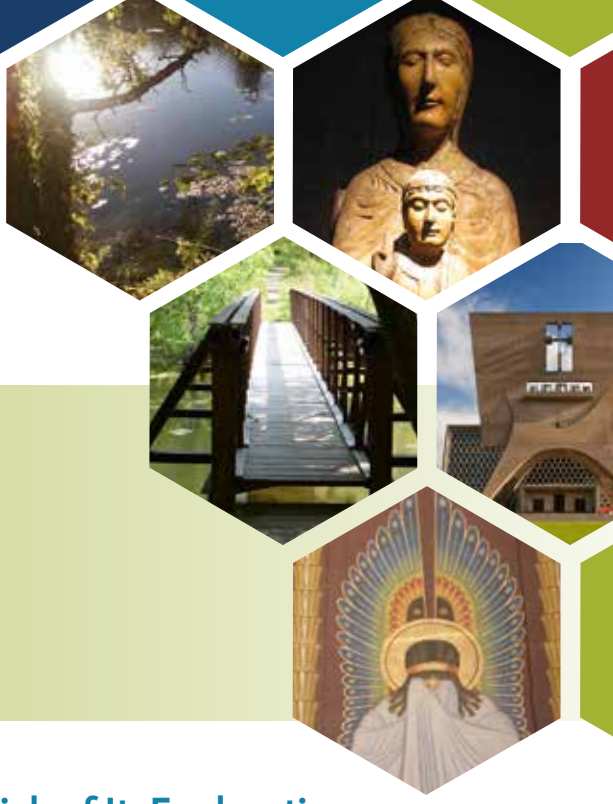

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Commonweal

DECEMBER 15, 2017 • VOLUME 144 • NUMBER 20

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Commonweal

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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 348, Congers, NY 10920-0348.

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. $108; Canada, $118; other parts of the world, $128. Add $45 for airmail.

Cover design: Cecilia Guerrero Rezes
Cover painting: Giovanni Bellini, *Madonna and Child*, ca. 1470

LETTERS

MODERN POETRY & RELIGION

Anthony Domestico's essay "Intelligible Mysteries" (November 10) draws from his obvious knowledge of a lot of complicated issues involved in responding to modern poetry and theology separately, and in relationship to each other. He is aware of the difficulty in discerning (and respecting) the aesthetic (rather than theological) nature of poetry. Yet his awareness of such complexity is merely mentioned in passing: it doesn't lead him to explore it, or to temper his sense of modern poetry bowing to serve religion. He asserts that poets such as T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden write poetry that promotes and reflects the theological thinking of such critics as Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich.

Domestico is not alone in this position: he echoes a widespread position in criticism for the past thirty or so years that uses some venue of life (such as theology) to explain poetry, and thereby explains away its aesthetic nature and the aesthetic possibilities (rather than dogma) it explores. This stance completely ignores the creative process of the poet, which, in the case of Eliot and Auden, entails something quintessentially Romantic, inherited from Wordsworth and, especially, Keats: the Romantic mode of poetry, in which the poet serves as his or her own subject, writing about what he or she finds in the subjective realm of feelings.

Not an easy task! Poets have to commit to being honest—without being confessional—an honesty that includes *not* bowing to popular politics or religion. They have to follow their imagination (not their intellect), their imagination drawn to this realm (filled with feelings about beautiful, ugly, or anything-between objects, events, or people). The imagination finds this realm numinous and wants to explore it simply because it is there: it doesn't care if it is true or false—paradoxically, because it sees it as an unprovable truth.

I realize from Domestico's contributor's note that the essay comes from the introduction to his latest book, which tells me that the book is written for like-minded critics who believe that modern poetry is as anti-Romantic as criticism; demystifying and rejecting the imagination (Eliot usually gets the credit for delivering the last blows to it), and "freeing" poetry to serve as something you can agree or disagree with rather than something aesthetic that gives you a way of exploring your own feelings and struggling with your own conscience.

JO-ANNE CAPPELUTI
Brea, Calif.

ANTHONY DOMESTICO REPLIES:

I appreciate Jo-Anne Cappeluti's letter, in particular her identification of the harm done by literary criticism that "uses some venue of life (such as theology)...to explain away the aesthetic nature of" poetry. I agree that this is bad criticism—and it's not, I hope, the kind that I write.

To be clear, I don't see, as Cappeluti claims I do, "modern poetry bowing to serve religion." To say that a poet reflects upon theological ideas in poetic form isn't to suggest that poetry is a handmaiden to theology. Rather, it's to suggest, as I say in this essay, that theological reading can "generate" and "provoke" aesthetic reflection. Take Auden's poem "Kairos and Logos," for instance, which I describe as "respond[ing] to...Paul Tillich's concept of kairos"—responding, not slavishly following. The poem asks the same "set of fundamental theological questions" that Tillich's work does. But it doesn't offer the same answers. Indeed, it doesn't offer answers at all; poetry isn't in the business of doing such things.

Moreover, I'd dispute the claim that poets "have to follow their imagination (not their intellect)." The intellect can—and does—provoke imaginative exploration, and the imagination can—and does—elicit intellectual exploration. In "The Social Function of Poetry," Eliot writes that the work of poets like Lucretius and Dante was "not designed to persuade the readers to an intellectual assent, but to convey an emotional equivalent of the ideas. What Lucretius and Dante teach you, in fact, is what it feels like to hold certain beliefs." Belief and feeling, religion and poetry, the intellect and the imagination: for the modernists—and for many poets—these aren't warring camps. They're conversation partners.

What Now?

St. Paul instructs Christians that the greatest of the theological virtues is love; but it's also true that the hardest of them is hope. "It's hoping that is difficult," confirms the French poet Charles Péguy. "And the easy path is to despair."

Living through the past year certainly supports that judgment. Even those who took the most dire view of how Donald Trump's ascension to high office might play out couldn't have been fully prepared for the cumulative force of Trump's incompetence and cruelty, how experiencing the Trump presidency, day after day, would feel. The combination of an unstable, wicked man in an office of vast powers inexorably generates dread and depression—aided, of course, by Twitter, Facebook, cable news, and all the other ways we are sometimes overwhelmed by what's happening.

War with North Korea looms. The Democrats are in disarray. Every day something disturbing seems to unfold, pushing yesterday's disturbing news out of the headlines and most of our minds. It all becomes a blur. But the present crisis goes far deeper than U.S. politics. Brave women have come forward in recent months to expose the sexual misconduct of powerful men, a long-overdue moment of reckoning surely unleashed, at least in part, by the fact that a man caught bragging about sexual assault now occupies the White House. The destruction of the planet continues apace; the increasingly obvious consequences of climate change are unfolding across the globe. The far right is ascendant in the United States and is gaining strength across Europe. And the church, which should provide an alternative to such troubles, too often reflects the divisions convulsing the broader culture.

If it feels like the End Times, it's not. But it is *apocalyptic*, a season of unveiling and revelation, when what lurked in the darkness is brought into the light and what quietly festered becomes fully known. The precariousness of a decent life, the anxieties and fears of those on the margins of society are apparent in new and convicting ways.

Perhaps this is why Pope Francis insists that "divine mercy is the foundation of Christian hope." In the midst of suffering and anxiety, moving forward can feel impossible. The guilt and knowledge of being implicated in structures of sin can feel overwhelming. The future, toward which hope is always oriented, seems bleak. But mercy means that life is not a dead end, that our failures are not final. Transformation can happen and healing is possible. Grace can break through. A different way of living together, more compassionately and generously, is not beyond reach. Not long ago, the pope reflected on what hope means in this way:

> Hope is the virtue of a heart that doesn't lock itself into darkness, that doesn't dwell on the past, does not simply get by in the present, but is able to see a tomorrow. Hope is the door that opens onto the future. Hope is a humble, hidden seed of life that, with time, will develop into a large tree.... A tiny flicker of light that feeds on hope is enough to shatter the shield of darkness. A single individual is enough for hope to exist, and that individual can be you. And then there will be another "you," and another "you," and it turns into an "us." And so, does hope begin when we have an "us?" No. Hope began with one "you." When there is an "us," there begins a revolution.

For Francis, those flickers of light mean living in solidarity with the poor and hungry and vulnerable. In that same talk, he holds up the parable of the Good Samaritan as expressing "the story of today's humanity," when the paths of so many are "riddled with suffering, as everything is centered around money, and things, instead of people." Too often the respectable and comfortable are "leaving behind thousands of human beings, or entire populations, on the side of the road." But there are others, those "who are creating a new world by taking care of the other, even out of their own pockets."

Christian hope, as this season reminds us, is eschatological—it is not finally a political slogan or expression of mere optimism. But that should also serve to embolden the faithful to build a better future. Hope is not dependent on any political order, any president or pope. Regimes rise and fall, but it is human beings who die and are resurrected. There are always neighbors to love; there are always the suffering who need friendship and grace. The possibility of joining with others to fight for the least of these remains. As Francis underscored, "No system can nullify our desire to open up to the good, to compassion, and to our capacity to react against evil, all of which stem from deep within our hearts." As long as that desire exists, hope endures. ■

November 29, 2017

Cathleen Kaveny

Policing the Communion Line

WHY SACRAMENTAL RIGORISM BACKFIRES

Many conservative Catholics remain opposed to relaxing the canonical prohibition against granting Communion to the divorced and civilly remarried. And many progressive Catholics perceive their more conservative counterparts as caring more about abstract legal rules than flesh-and-blood human beings.

In my view, however, this particular perception is misplaced. Most Catholics who oppose relaxing the rules on Communion are neither heartless nor unmerciful. They think that a more lenient practice is inconsistent with Jesus' words in the gospels—a debatable point, and one on which many scholars disagree. But more than biblical interpretation shapes the approach of such conservatives. They also believe the best way for the church to help weak and sinful human beings flourish in the long run is to hold the line on the canonical prohibition. This belief also needs to be challenged, because it rests on an unrealistic notion of the power of legal norms, including canonical norms.

As I understand the conservative Catholic case, it runs like this. Lifelong marital commitment increases one's chances of personal happiness. Perseverance during the tough times is difficult but essential; studies show that most married couples who weather their storms find themselves in a better place in a few years' time. The canonical prohibition has a carrot; it promotes the blessings of a lifelong sacramental union. But it also seems to have a stick—the threat of denying Communion incentivizes married couples to stick it out.

In the view of conservative Catholics, while the prohibition may appear cruel, it is actually kind. They admit that a few tragic cases may slip through the canonical cracks. But they point out that law, including canon law, is made for the general run of people. And in general, the pressure to stay together works for the well-being of the many more people who are able to work through their marital difficulties. They think of it like the U.S. Army: if unhappy recruits were simply permitted to leave basic training without any consequences, one or two people might be better off, but many others would be deprived of the benefits that sustained military discipline and commitment can confer.

So what's the problem with this line of reasoning? The tough-love approach depends on the stick, not just the carrot. The Army analogy points to the basic flaw. If you walk away from basic training, the Army can and will put you in prison for desertion. In our society, there is no comparable threat for those who walk away from sacramental marriages, in either secular or canon law. In fact, nothing prevents a divorced and civilly remarried couple from starting afresh anonymously at a parish across town. No one is going to ask for a marriage certificate, let alone certificates of divorce and annulment, before giving them Communion.

In the abstract, the church could crack down. For example, pastors could do background checks on all married couples in the parish in order to identify and monitor those who were not in fact wed sacramentally. More broadly, they could restrict access to the Communion line to those who could prove they had recently gone to confession. But that is not a real option. The church has already decided against policing Communion lines, leaving the decision to individual communicants. Moreover, it has decided against such policing not for practical reasons, but for principled ones: such a practice fails to respect the dignity and conscience of the members of the body of Christ.

What about the function of the prohibition in communicating the value of lifelong marriage? That doesn't work in real life either. The remote prospect of being denied Communion will not deter men and women from entering into ill-considered first marriages. The pain of being denied Communion is too abstract to dissuade most people from leaving the miseries of a failed union. And the existential joy and relief in finding a new love and life partner is likely to overwhelm anxiety about the effects of a distant punishment.

Moreover, as currently applied, this teaching's intended moral lesson can easily appear to be hypocritical and even perverse. Precisely because so many Catholics in irregular sexual or marital situations do receive Communion, the prohibition falls most heavily upon those who take church teaching most scrupulously. As applied, canon law seems to be penalizing those who care most about their relationship to the church. The basic teaching—the gift and value of lifelong sacramental marriage—is sound. But it is undercut by the inconsistencies and arbitrariness in applying it.

The urgency of positive, proactive concern for marriage and family is the overarching message of *Amoris laetitia*, Pope Francis's recent exhortation on those topics. What would such concern look like in the concrete? In my own view, leading with mercy is a far more effective strategy than denying the divorced and remarried the grace of the sacraments. The pope has lamented that church teaching can become "dead stones to be hurled at others." I'd add that it shouldn't be a stick to beat them with either. ■

Mollie Wilson O'Reilly

Lucky Me

LEARNING TO BE HAPPY WITH TOO MUCH

I hear it so often it might as well be my name. "Well! You have your hands full!"

It's true, I do. Often literally. I hear it as I deliver my older two boys to school—"older" here is a relative term, as they are only six and four years old—making them form a hand-holding chain with their toddler brother to get through the parking lot, hustling them along with the baby strapped to my chest. I hear it at the library, at story time, when I'm down to just the younger two. I hear it at Mass or in the store or on the street: I have my hands full. I don't mind hearing it. I know it's meant to be empathetic. But it tends to make me self-conscious: Yes, I can barely manage my own children; is it that obvious?

The four

The other day, at the drugstore, I was sure I was about to hear it again, from the woman behind me in line, watching as I loaded cartons of diapers onto the register counter while trying to keep track of my four-year-old. "I see you all the time at Mass," she said. "Your boys are so well behaved." This is not exactly true, but I know it means "I'm glad you keep showing up," and so I am always glad to hear it. She has four kids of her own, she told me, and three grandkids, all grown. And then she said, "You're so lucky to be a stay-at-home mom."

I have to admit I don't often think of it that way. It took me a while to even accept that "stay-at-home mom" is an accurate label for me. The first time someone said it I instinctively shook my head. No, no, I'm a writer and an editor who just happens to be running a home for boys at present. I am an editor at large, where "at large" means "mainly focused on thank-you notes and first-grade book reports." "Stay-at-home mom" has always sounded to me like something you plan for, rather than something that overtakes you. Stay-at-home moms have their acts together. They're not looking over their shoulder at the life that late they led. Me, I'm still a little dizzy from it all: *I have four sons*, I hear myself saying, and I think, *That can't possibly be right.*

Sometimes I get away from my mothering duties for a few hours to see what my *Commonweal* colleagues are up to, and I get to meet readers who tell me they enjoy my work, and it's very gratifying. And I say, "I wish I could do more!" and never "I'm so lucky to be a stay-at-home mom."

It's possible that woman I met in the store has some cultural agenda I wouldn't agree to. She may believe mothers should never work or want to work. I won't be a poster mom for that. But I am grateful that she didn't just tell me what I expected to hear, because she was right. I am lucky to be able to choose to stay home with my kids when it feels like the obvious best choice, to be able to get by on one salary, to have health insurance and healthy children and all this time to spend with them while they are small. That's not the attitude I bring to it most days, of course. Every one of them needs more attention than I can give, so mostly I feel overwhelmed and guilty and impatient. My two-year-old has taken to asking, "Mommy, are you happy at me?" when he can tell from my huffy manner that I'm thinking about something else I need to be doing. He doesn't know why I can't just enjoy this game of let's-pretend-we're-dump-trucks without frowning at the clock and calculating whether there's time to nurse the baby before preschool pickup.

I try, every Advent, for a fresh start. In recent years my pledges to spend "more time" on this or that—more time praying, more time writing, more time playing with each of my sons—have been doomed to failure. I really am doing the best I can, and it's time for me to face it. (Maybe real stay-at-home moms don't always have their acts together?) So this year I am going to try to worry less about the things I can't do or be or create. That stuff will still be there when my boys are out of diapers. And every time someone reminds me that my hands are full, I will try to remind myself that my hands are full of blessings for me to be happy at. ■

John Gehring

Does 'Prolife' Mean More than 'Anti-Abortion'?

THE U.S. BISHOPS CONFERENCE DOESN'T SEEM TO THINK SO

Most Catholics didn't lose any sleep over who would be elected chairman of the prolife committee at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' national meeting in Baltimore last month. But the choice between Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich and Archbishop Joseph Naumann of Kansas City represented something of a referendum on whether or not the U.S. hierarchy is coalescing behind the priorities and pastoral vision of Pope Francis nearly five years into his papacy. In a rarity for ecclesiastical politics, the vote even generated a lengthy *Wall Street Journal* preview story that anonymously quoted a bishop remarking on the election's broader significance.

Cupich lost the election to lead the bishops' prolife committee to Naumann by a count of 96-82, the first time in more than forty years that a cardinal on the ballot did not win. Appointed by Francis to lead the nation's third-largest Roman Catholic archdiocese in 2014, Cupich has used his prominent pulpit to address gun violence, health care, capital punishment, and economic inequality—not only as social challenges, but as urgent prolife issues. If abortion rightly shocks the conscience, Cupich wrote in a *Chicago Tribune* op-ed, "we should be no less appalled by the indifference toward the thousands of people who die daily for lack of decent medical care…or who are executed by the state in the name of justice."

The cardinal is playing a key role in reviving the consistent-ethic-of-life framework championed decades ago by another Chicago cardinal, Joseph Bernardin, who for a while became the public face of U.S. Catholicism. He offered a bold, controversial approach to defending human life that rejected single-issue politics, drawing opposition from powerful conservative bishops who feared that approach would water down the church's stance on abortion. During the lengthy pontificate of John Paul II, Bernardin's efforts were beaten back by bishops and other influential Catholics who elevated abortion as the preeminent issue for the church's public engagement.

Naumann, the Kansas City archbishop who will now lead the bishops' prolife activities, has culture-war instincts that reflect a starkly different style and set of priorities from those of Pope Francis and Cardinal Cupich. For example, Naumann asserted that the Girl Scouts embodied "a hostile secular culture" when he severed ties with the organization in his diocese a few months ago because of its association with groups that support abortion rights, contraception, and LGBT equality. In his diocesan newspaper, the archbishop publicly rebuked Democratic vice-presidential candidate Sen. Tim Kaine, a Catholic, for his support of abortion rights. When Kathleen Sebelius served as governor of Kansas he publicly told her to refrain from receiving Communion because of her position on abortion. "The issues that pertain to family life, to marriage, to the dignity and sanctity of human life, do have a priority in our Catholic social teaching," Naumann said in an interview with *Crux* during last fall's presidential election. "Those are kind of foundational issues for us.... I would say, however, in terms of the magnitude of things, abortion is a much more important issue, simply because of the sheer number of innocent lives that are taken every year in our culture."

There is not a Catholic bishop with breath in his lungs who doesn't consider abortion a grave evil. Pope Francis unambiguously denounces what the church considers to be a direct assault on innocent human life, as does Cupich. What's at stake for the church isn't whether or not bishops will speak out against abortion, but what framework the church can use to understand and express its commitment to defending life without getting boxed in by a two-party political system. The late Archbishop John Quinn, a former president of the U.S. bishops' conference, reflected on this challenge in 2009 after the University of Notre Dame faced an ugly backlash from conservative bishops and activists when it invited President Barack Obama to give a commencement address:

> The condemnation of President Obama and the wider policy shift that represents signal to many thoughtful persons that the bishops have now come down firmly on the Republican side in American politics. The bishops are believed to communicate that for all the promise the Obama administration has on issues of health care, immigration reform, global poverty and war and peace, the leadership of the church in the United States has strategically tilted in favor of an ongoing alliance with the Republican Party. A sign of this stance is seen to be the adoption of a policy of confrontation rather than a policy of engagement with the Obama administration.

Quinn underscored that "there is no disagreement within the U.S. bishops' conference about the moral evil of abortion, its assault upon the dignity of the human person, or the moral imperative of enacting laws that prohibit abortion in American society." But, he continued, "there is deep and troubled disagreement among us on the issue of how we as bishops should witness concerning this most searing and volatile issue in American public life. And this disagreement has now become a serious and increasing impediment to our ability to teach effectively in our own community and in the wider American society."

These warnings largely went unheeded in the American

Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann at the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore

CNS PHOTO / BOB ROLLER

hierarchy because those with power and influence in the church at the time, both in the United States and Rome, profoundly disagreed with that analysis. Four years after Quinn's commentary, Pope Francis was elected and immediately jolted the church by proposing a different approach. "We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods," the pope said in a stunning interview early in his pontificate. "The teaching of the church...is clear and I am a son of the church, but it is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time.... We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel." In his encyclical, *Laudato si'*, Francis argued that abortion, the devastation brought on by climate change, and the ravages of economic inequality all take lives and should not be understood separately. "Everything is connected," Francis emphasized.

It is finding this "new balance" that American bishops have been wrestling with since Francis's election—and so far the results have not always been encouraging. The defeat of Cupich amounted to "the bishops giving the middle finger to Pope Francis," wrote Michael Sean Winters at the *National Catholic Reporter*. Winters is right, though I don't believe the situation is without hope. Cupich's defeat certainly demonstrates that a significant slice of the American hierarchy is either ambivalent or opposed to Francis's vision for how the church should prioritize issues and engage politically. But the church turns like an ocean liner, not a speed boat. And change is happening. Two years ago Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, president of the bishops' conference, pushed back against efforts from bishops who reflected Francis's approach to make the conference's election year document, "Faithful Citizenship," more reflective of the pope's teachings on economic inequality and environmental degradation. This week, however, DiNardo spoke about protecting undocumented immigrants and keeping immigrant families together as a "prolife policy." The specific use of prolife framing to address immigration shows that Francis is influencing the way bishops speak about public-policy questions.

Reformers need time. The pope needs five more years of appointing the kind of bishops in the United States who will help reclaim a more effective public voice for the church. Cupich may have lost the vote to lead the conference's prolife committee, but he holds an even more important role. Last year, Francis appointed him to serve on the Vatican's Congregation of Bishops, an influential post that lets him advise the pope on who will be named new bishops. For now, the future of the American hierarchy is in good hands. ■

John Gehring *is Catholic program director at Faith in Public Life, an advocacy group in Washington, and a former associate director for media relations at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. He is author of* The Francis Effect: A Radical Pope's Challenge to the American Catholic Church *(Rowman & Littlefield, 2015) and a contributing editor at* Commonweal.

Joseph Sorrentino

The Asylum to Our South

MEXICO'S MIGRATION CRISIS

Juan Alberto has lost both a son and grandson to the Mara Salvatrucha, one of the most vicious gangs in Latin America. The gang had tried to force the two young men to join; when they refused, they were kidnapped and killed. The rest of the family, afraid they, too, would be killed, fled Honduras in the middle of the night and ended up in Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state. Today Juan Alberto lives with his wife, two of their sons, and two young grandchildren in a large but mostly empty house in the city of Tapachula.

The house is on a dirt road, not far from the main thoroughfare. To get to it, one crosses a small bridge spanning a stagnant pool of water. Inside the front door is a large empty room. To the right are two small bedrooms with thin mattresses and sleeping bags on the floor. The kitchen is in the back, sparsely furnished with two small tables and a few plastic chairs. Santos Ermilia, Juan Alberto's wife, cooks on a two-burner electric hotplate.

Like an increasing number of people fleeing the extreme violence of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador (often referred to as the Northern Triangle Countries, or NTCs), Juan Alberto's family have decided to apply for asylum in Mexico. They have little choice. "If we could, we would go to the United States," Juan Alberto tells me. But he knows that traveling through Mexico is dangerous, and that getting asylum in the United States is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Going home isn't an option. When I asked what would happen if they returned to Honduras, he smiled sadly and drew a finger across his neck. So they are resigned to staying in Mexico. "I am happy here because we are away from danger."

On average, about four hundred thousand people from the NTCs enter Mexico each year. According to Francesca Fontanini, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) Communications Director for Latin America, the number was closer to half a million in 2016. The number fell a little during the first four months of 2017—advocates called it the Trump Effect—but Fontanini says the numbers are increasing again. She expects another half million migrants to enter Mexico this year. The reason is simple: "The level of violence in Central America is still high."

The Northern Triangle Countries, which are among

Juan Alberto and his granddaughter Chara

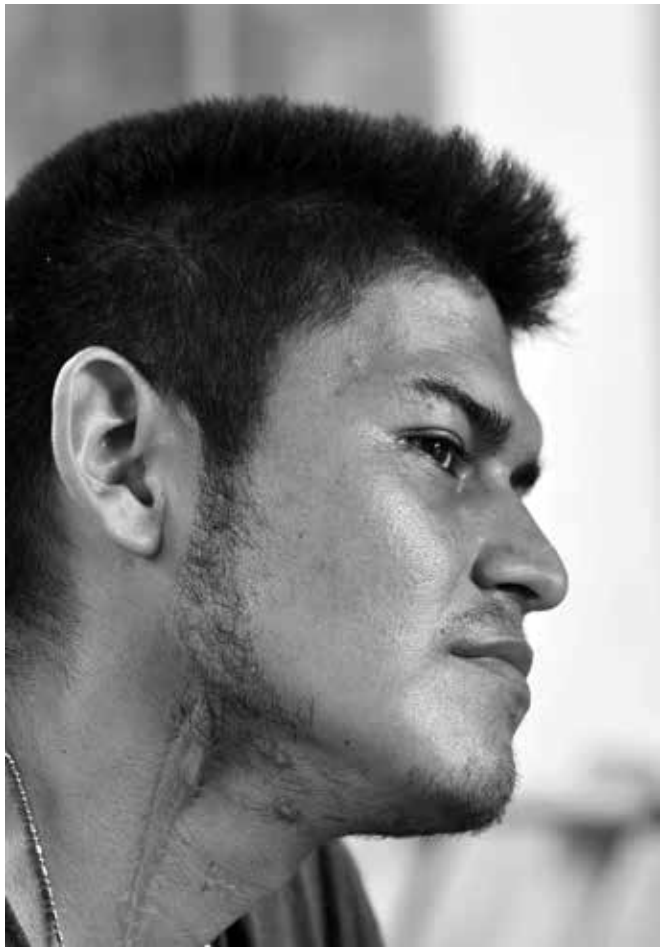
ALL PHOTOS BY JOSEPH SORRENTINO

the poorest in the world, are also among the most violent. Most years, one of them holds the top spot for murders per capita. Most of the violence is perpetrated by two gangs, the MS-18 and Mara Salvatrucha, often collectively referred to as *maras*. They murder, kidnap, and rape with impunity. People in the NTCs report having to pay the gangs as much as half their income in "*renta*" (extortion) so they can work. Some pay *renta* just to live in a neighborhood. When I ask why people don't go to the police, Felix Antonio, a twenty-seven-year-old Honduran, offers the same answer I heard from every Central American I interviewed for this article: "The maras control everything. Police do nothing; they collaborate with *maras*." Felix Antonio's mother was killed by the *maras* ("God knows why," he says) and he himself was stabbed in the neck, leaving him unable to use his left hand.

Until recently, the overwhelming majority of those who fled the NTCs tried to make it to the United States, but as it has become more dangerous to journey to the U.S.-Mexican border and more difficult to win asylum in the United States, more people are opting to stay in other countries, including Mexico. But obtaining asylum in Mexico is also difficult and, even if it is granted, many challenges remain.

Officially, it takes forty-five working days, or about two months, for an asylum application to be processed. For most, it takes much longer than that. According to Fontanini, the wait has recently stretched to at least six months. Once someone is granted asylum, he has the same rights as a Mexican citizen and is allowed to work; until then, he isn't supposed to. But most asylum-seekers are poor and can't afford not to work. So many take jobs in the informal economy. They "want some money, they want some dignity," says Fontanini. "They work long hours [for] very bad pay." Like undocumented Mexican workers in the United States, their legal status leaves them vulnerable to exploitation.

Josue was in the Honduran Air Force but left when the *maras*—both MS-18 and Mara Salvatrucha—threatened him because he was in the military. "It is dangerous to be a soldier in Honduras," he tells me. Josue fled, leaving behind his wife and two young children. For much of the way north, he rode the freight trains they call *La Bestia* (the Beast). He was robbed of most of his money and is currently living in a shelter in Mexico City. There he works in construction while waiting for a decision on his asylum application. "I earn about 200 pesos a day (about $11) for ten hours of work," he says. "Mexicans are paid more." His story is echoed by another Honduran named Edilberto, who lived for a time in the same shelter and now has an apartment a short distance away. "There is prejudice against Central Americans and exploitation," he says. "When you work without papers, you are paid less, maybe half." Edilberto is now studying to be a chef, traveling two and a half hours each way to school. He plans to stay in Mexico. "Mexico is better now," he says. "There is more possibility to live in freedom; there is no fear of *maras*." Then he adds, "I have no other options, really." Bryant, another young refugee from Honduras tells me, "I prefer to be hungry here than there, where they will kill me."



Felix Antonio showing the scar left after he was cut by a Mara Salvatrucha member

The UN High Commission on Refugees considers the majority of people fleeing the Northern Triangle Countries to be fleeing "generalized violence" and therefore eligible for asylum. Mexico's own immigration laws state that anyone fleeing generalized violence qualifies for asylum, but the Mexican government does not make it easy for refugees. Katherin Ramirez, an attorney at the CAFEMIN shelter in Mexico City, told me that 60 to 70 percent of all asylum applications from Central Americans are rejected. And while asylum status may make life less difficult, it does not make it easy. They are still newcomers, and still considered outsiders. They still have to build a new life from scratch. Migrants tend to gravitate to the larger cities, where there's work. They often end up living on the outskirts of these cities, where there's affordable housing. And so they often spend hours commuting from one part of a metropolis to another. Those who do manage to find jobs in the formal economy usually earn minimum wage, which is 80 pesos (about $4.44) a day. "There is not enough

A woman named Maria in the Jesus el Buen Pastor Shelter

work—or work that pays enough money," says Ramon Verdugo, director of the Todo Por Ellos shelter in Tapachula, Chiapas. "On minimum wage, people can live, but will live like many Mexicans: in a culture of poverty."

Some Central Americans have found life here to be too difficult. "It doesn't make sense to live in Mexico," says Carlos Alberto, a professional soccer play who fled Honduras because of the violence. "It's as violent here as in Honduras." His plan is to work in Mexico until he has saved enough money to pay for a coyote to help him get to the United States. Sr. Chela, who works in the Samaritano shelter in Tula, Hidalgo, tells me that about 10 percent of the Central Americans she's met eventually decide to return home. "Some, because of the violence in Mexico, will ask how to contact INM so they can be deported." Deportation is the cheapest way home.

As dusk falls in Tapachula, Juan Alberto walks me from his home to the main road. We talk about his new life as I wait for a cab to take me back into town. He says the UNHCR is helping them "with rent and a little with food. Not all, but some." One of his sons is working (illegally) in construction, earning 170 pesos (about $9) a day for ten hours of work. In addition to the family's financial worries, there are the challenges of fitting into a new culture. When I ask Juan Alberto if he misses Honduras, he sighs: "Oh, so much. So much." He starts describing the differences between the two countries—different customs, different foods, even different words. "You ask for something by the name we use in my country and they don't understand you. I feel sad sometimes because I have nothing here. If there were no *mara*, we would still be in Honduras." ■

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Wonders Never Cease

Integrity & the Modern Intellectual Condition

Marilynne Robinson

I place the origins of modern intellectual tradition in the seventeenth century for the purposes of this discussion, granting that assertions of this kind are most useful when they are understood as provisional. The "modern," however the word is understood, has been going on for a very long time, has in fact grown old in the course of its pilgrimage from the late Renaissance to the day before yesterday. Here, in brief, is my theory of how the modern period arose and how it has become another era, and in need of another name. The term post-modern doesn't serve—it only connotes namelessness. The fact that it has not been improved upon is interesting in its own right, of course.

The modern, the era of science, arose when the Renaissance and the Reformation brought acute and positive attention to human subjectivity. The mind became a sacred space where God communed with the individual in ways that enabled thought and perception in the discovery of empirical fact. While it is difficult to imagine a purer statement of subjectivity than Descartes' *I think therefore I am*, his subjectivity is not entrapment because God permits him his perceptions, and God would not lie. Scientific inquiry in its beginnings was one mode of interaction between the human and the divine that arouses those gifts of the mind that were thought of then as proof of a human and divine bond and likeness.

Scientific method proved powerful, empiricism allayed philosophical worries about subjectivity until they were in effect forgotten, and the assumption became general that science could and sometime would explain everything, including the mind itself. So over time the mind was desacralized and the world as well, metaphysics was put aside, and science, brilliant as it was, took on the character of dispeller of myth and agent of disillusionment. There was nothing inevitable about this. In the first place, the remarkable capacities of the mind, in the Renaissance often celebrated in terms of its ability to understand the movements of the stars and planets and their relative size and distance, were spectacularly demonstrated in the emergence of vast new areas of knowledge. Yet somehow that central mystery, the ability of the mind to deeply know the physical world, ceased to be acknowledged, even as its impact on thought and culture grew continuously. The most remarkable thing about the universe, Einstein and others have said, is that it is accessible to our understanding. Then the converse must also be true—the most remarkable thing about *us* is that our understanding is of a kind to find the universe accessible. A good Renaissance humanist, a Pico della Mirandola, would

A fifteenth-century oil painting of Pico della Mirandola

ART COLLECTION / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

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seize on this as proof of our central place in creation. But as science developed it put such thoughts aside. It dropped the great Renaissance fascination with our singular character as creatures who learn, devise, imagine, create. Brilliant science celebrated itself, rightly enough, but it ceased to marvel over the gifts of the singular species that invented science and has persisted in it. Humankind has fallen in its own estimation, while the notion emerged and still vigorously persists that this utterly human project is somehow inhuman. Among other things, it is usually taken to be aloof from the errors we are prone to.

Religion came to be reckoned among these errors. It began to be regarded as a crude explanatory system, an attempt to do what science actually *could* do, that is, account for the origins and the workings of things. And on these grounds religion came to be treated as though it had been discredited by science. Scripture, the Church Fathers, and classical theology have far other interests, yet Christianity has been earnestly and ineptly defended by some as if it really were battling science for the same terrain, as if it really were a collection of just-so stories all along, rather than the body of history, poetry, ethical instruction and reflection, and metaphysics as well, that had deeply informed, dignified, and beautified Western Civilization for so many centuries. Science has not produced social ethics or poetry. It has very little to say about history, has induced little in the way of philosophical reflection. This is nothing against it, of course. It is about other business.

But to put science in place of religion as if it were an equivalent framing of reality must necessarily entail the loss of many things that have indeed been lost. There are some transformations that are worth pausing over, simply to appreciate their strangeness. Christianity, which had shaped literatures and cities and regimes, had structured time, and consecrated the passages of life, began to be tendentiously misrepresented, and very few seemed even to notice what was happening. This is as true now as it has ever been. And there are still the would-be loyalists who will forever insist that the Bible *is* in fact a collection of utterly veracious just-so stories, reinforcing the arguments of their supposed adversaries.

It is a pity that Europeans took to tramping around in the non-European world when they did, corrupting every kind of evidence while imposing their assumptions on the lives and languages of the people they found there. Notably, in their response to indigenous religions, they interpreted what passed through the dense filter of their incomprehension as primitivity, which primitivity was then widely asserted and assumed to be the basis and essence of all religion. This kind of thinking lives on among scholarly syncretists, who propose that the God of the Hebrew Bible is a composite of local gods, a little El, a little Baal, a little Marduk. These mythic eminences left literatures that are a more-than-sufficient refutation of the notion that they contributed attributes to the God of Israel. But where a core primitivity is assumed, their very unlikeness authenticates them.

In any case, in the course of all this there has been a radical transformation of the West's conception of humankind. No one now would say of us, "in apprehension how like a god!" A Shakespeare returned from the grave would be astounded to learn what that apprehension has been up to, how far it has penetrated into inconceivably distant reaches of the universe, for example. Writers of his period generalized instances of brilliance to characterize Man in the abstract, the human species itself. We detach human achievements from humankind, whom we are then free to consider in whatever reductionist terms might suit our purposes, recently as economic units who can only act rationally in terms of self-interest, in every interaction minimizing cost to themselves while maximizing benefit, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Self-interestedness is not a trait well thought of in traditional moral systems, however demotic. That it is presented to us as uniquely and inevitably our governing motive puts an end to all the old struggles of the soul, and moots old considerations like honor or loyalty or compassion.

How like an angel.

Wars, plague, punishments designed to terrorize and appall, lethal poverty—every kind of horror was commonplace in Renaissance England. If we think we have grounds for doubting the sacredness and splendor of our species, they had better grounds. At the same time, the best that we have done, the sheer mass of it, would surely confirm them in their high estimate of human capacities. This is to say that there is no necessity behind the extreme declension our species has suffered in its own eyes.

In defense of this lower valuation, our moral failures will be enumerated. There are a great many of them, as there are in any age or generation. We may be more aware of them than earlier periods were of their own crimes and vices. If this is true, and if the case we wish to bring against ourselves might be called moral, it is interesting that we can at the same time be receptive to a model of human nature that is

morally blank at best. Self-interestedness is not a trait well thought of in traditional moral systems, however demotic. That it is presented to us as uniquely and inevitably our governing motive puts an end to all the old struggles of the soul, and moots old considerations like honor or loyalty or compassion. I do not wish to imply that people are no longer moved by such considerations. But I am impressed by the authority of an idea of self and others that strips everyone of individuality and of seriousness, and of the possibility of actions that are original and free. What will Western liberalism finally mean if there really is no more to respect in citizen and stranger than this?

So, if we say that the age of science began with a Renaissance awe at the power and agility of the human mind, endorsed by the faith that its brilliance was to be enjoyed and marveled at as engagement with God and likeness to him; if we have now arrived at a point where the mind and the self are frequently said not to exist, according to contemporary theory following God himself out of the universe of credible things, then it is clearly an understatement to say a tremendous inversion has taken place. The exalted mind of early science has given way to a flattening of experience that, on no actual grounds, is called modern and also scientific—this while science has made tiny earth a seraphic eye that turns every way, looking always farther and deeper into the strange, surging cosmos.

I have presented a list of historical errors, which have affected Western life profoundly, and the rest of the world as well because of the assertiveness and prominence of Western culture. The modern period has been shadowed by gloom, nostalgia, disillusionment, anomie, deracination, loss of faith, dehumanization, atomization, secularization, and assorted other afflictions of the same general kind. It has become an iron cage. And so on. Objectively, there is very little in late-modern experience to account for all this moaning. By the standards of earlier centuries we have been very fortunate. These days most people see their children live to adulthood. It would be hardhearted to consider this a small blessing. There are related facts, also non-trivial. For example, far fewer women die in childbirth, leaving far fewer orphans. In Western countries, at least, most people can read, a major enhancement of life. All this is definitely something to work with, in terms of our having lives we can enjoy and make meaningful. And a great many people do precisely this. Nevertheless, as a matter of curriculum, which is our substitute for catechism, we learn that something has gone very wrong, that our human modifications of the world make it impossible to live a truly human life. The horizon open to us is that "patient anesthetized upon a table." An implication behind it all is that the disillusioned know something the uninitiated don't know. The importance of that unnamed thing is granted, and the gloom it brings with it is given place, in books, on canvasses, in plays and installations. And everything that reflects its scale and coloration, which to my eye looks like resentment, desolation, and self-pity, is ipso facto modern. So it has been for more than one hundred fifty years. Enormities have befallen the West during those years, which were wholly enormities committed *by* the West, induced in part by the sense of threat and failure, and nostalgia as well, that has cursed late modernity, both culture and period. I generalize. But in my experience there is an alienation between science and the humanities that discourages humanists from acquiring more than a minimal awareness of science, poorly digested, while at the same time they assume that their own work is marginalized, even a little humiliated, by the triumph of science. Unaccountably, in this brilliant period the workings of the mind, which uniquely express and describe the mind, whether as poetry or as microbiology, have ceased to be of interest in themselves.

The thought has been prevalent for a long time that the human project, whatever that is, has failed and left us stranded and bewildered. The myth is that this is the effect of modernity with its disillusionments, the sad burden of all we now know. But in fact our errors have brought us here, the inversions and misconstructions that arbitrarily, though as if by necessity, enforce certain conclusions about what life means and how it can be experienced by us. Intellectual integrity can be and often is understood to mean that one enters boldly into diminished reality, even kicks the rubble around a little. But it *should* mean examination of received notions, for example that reality is indeed diminished. Intellectual integrity is not possible so long as we give ourselves over wholly to cultural consensus, however broad, however long enshrined.

At the beginning of the modern period, God was a given in the field of thought that was the seed bed of science in our sense of the word. This aspect of the thinking of figures like Descartes, Locke, and Newton is regularly treated as a tip of the hat to prevailing powers, or a carryover from a kind of thinking they were themselves finding the means to leave behind. It looks to me, from my reading in the period, as though the Reformation in England, which radically isolated the individual in the fact of asserting his or her immediate relation with God, found consciousness, that is, experience, a very rich field of theological exploration. Their exploration took the form of a parsing of the mind according to its functions and capacities, with the understanding that it is, and is made to be, the intermediary between God and the soul—granted, of course, that anyone might choose to reject this awareness of God's intimate awareness of him, and might turn away from the knowledge of God implicitly proffered to him. Adam figures in all this, as the archetypical human being in whose creation we are all created and whose attributes we receive, fallenness famously, but also the ability to know God as Adam did.

I confess I am perfectly happy to accept this view of things. However, I can hardly recuse myself from a discussion in which, so far as I know, I am the lone participant. So, hav-

ENNUI

lightning bolts of sorrow
knowing he's neither here
nor there my new life
making my way through drifts
wondering if he's only
in my heart does he die again
when I die are we heartless
holding hostage
those we most want to see
in the flesh leaving fresh
prints on a water glass
precious as the glyphs
of gulls and sandpipers

—Elisabeth Murawski

ing given fair warning of my biases, I will consider certain consequences of conceiving of the mind thus theistically, putting aside the question of God's existence, simply admitting his existence with its effects into the discussion as Einstein did the cosmological constant, not as anything demonstrated, only as something somehow necessary to making the rest of the system work.

First of all, to do this re-situates the discussion of the nature of the mind in our *experience* of the mind—our own and others'—rather than in theoretical speculations about the brain as a product of evolution, or the brain as a lump of tissue responsive to stimuli. Wherever any kind of brain is studied, except a human brain, the questions are, what can it do, and what does it do. Researchers in London have demonstrated that a bee can learn to perform behaviors that are unlike anything a bee is called upon to do in the normal course of life. A very tiny brain is sufficient to produce behavior that might appear to justify the word "intelligent." This is consistent with Darwin's observations of ants in his garden. So reductionism in the case of an insect is inappropriate, because, elegant as its suite of instincts clearly is, they do not preclude its having the ability to react to novel circumstances, to appraise and adapt, within limits we will never establish since we will never know how to test for them exhaustively. Appraise and adapt—I use anthropomorphic language here, lacking any other, therefore lacking any way to suggest a distinction between human and insect purposiveness. Despite Darwin, it has been usual for a long time to make reductionist accounts of human behavior and consciousness, likening them to those of ants or crickets to demonstrate, in effect, that anthropomorphic language is not really appropriate in our case either. But better science undercuts the old notion that tiny-brained creatures are automata running solely on instinct. It appears they can sometimes decide when instinctive responses would not be useful. I go farther here than the science does in inferring self-awareness. In any case, as we learn that intelligence has been lavished on the living world at large, we should be less reluctant to acknowledge our share in it.

It is increasingly clear that there is no baseline simplicity to which our own essential nature can be reduced. Mysterious intelligence is mysteriously pervasive. Bad science has for a long time assumed a not-so-great chain of being, an apparent rising complexity that is in fact only a compounding of simplicities, explainable top to bottom in terms of a fundamental primitivity. In fact we are an extraordinary instance of a pervasive complexity. Science has not proposed any way of accounting for this fact, not having been aware of it as a fact until quite recently. A theistic vision of the world is freer to see the world whole, as it is in itself, so to speak. "The world is full of the grandeur of God. / It will flame out, like shining from shook foil," in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Within this great given, that Being is an astonishment, any aspect of being can be approached with an expectation of discovering wondrous things. The slime that comes up from the depths of the sea in fishermen's nets is a ruined universe of bioluminescence. Microorganisms live in clouds, air moves in rivers, butterflies navigate the earth's magnetic field. The matter cosmologists call "dark," which makes up most of the mass of the universe, seems to be non-atomic. Wonders never cease.

Over against this we have a constricted empiricism, the building upward from the seemingly known or presumptively knowable, its expectations based on limited technology and on the old idea that science is a process of de-romanticization, de-mystification. To speak as the theists did of lavishness, elegance, artfulness, is to introduce language capable of acknowledging that there is more to the world than its intricate economies of survival. John Locke, a theist, saw Being as a great, boisterous ocean that will always remain essentially unknown to us. The more we learn, the truer this seems to be. To apply too broadly a paradigm drawn from narrow experience is an error that entails cascading errors. Classical religion brings assumptions of vastness and relation, and beauty, and wonder, and humility before its subject, all very useful in giving reality its due. I do not wish to imply that secular scientists do not often bring these gifts to their work, or arrive at them in the course of their work. It is in the study of humankind that these things are consistently absent. It is as if we can only be granted a place in the universe if we are made vastly less extraordinary than we clearly are. This is the kind of persisting bias and error that intellectual integrity would forbid. The old the-

ists looked at extraordinary humankind, the quintessence of dust, to consider the nature of the universe. This makes perfect sense. We do, after all, demonstrate in our being what is potential in matter and time.

Second, if we approach the mind with my cosmological constant still factored in, we can say the mind is morally competent—Adamically speaking, that is, in its design, allowing for all deviations from the ideal or the norm. I am not the first to note that modern thinking about the mind has often proceeded from the study of pathologies, real or not. It seems clear enough to me why Victorian women might have been prone to hysteria. I look back at the comparatively mild limits and prejudices I escaped by grace of the Civil Rights movement as if I had found myself two steps clear of a falling rock. In the American South, the intense depression observed in slaves sold away from their families was diagnosed as an illness to which their race was oddly prone. In such cases, assumptions about the nature and life experience of certain human beings obscured the obvious, and science built on the sand of engrained error. I suspect this may be why the study of human consciousness is so markedly different from science in general. It very typically confirms or defends theories about social roles. The fact that it does not view the human person with particular respect as consciousness or, to use an old phrase, as moral agent, has a long history of grave and shameful consequences.

The great anomaly here is that the science of the human brain, if science is indeed the right word, does not take account of what the brain actually does. I have been invited from time to time to lend my brain to science—that is, to pass it through an fMRI while using it creatively. Even if I had not seen an article about how this machinery had been taking hair from the heads of experimental subjects due to faulty calibration, the thought that I could attempt anything remotely similar in such circumstances to what I do when I am writing fiction is simply bizarre. This is surely a grand instance of the application of faulty methods to a faulty question. The science of the mind, as it is practiced now and has been practiced for generations, has no place for human inwardness, the reflective settling into oneself that somehow finds and yields structure and meaning, not all at once but as a kind of unwilled constellating of thoughts and things to which some part of one's attention may have drifted any number of times. It is in the nature of the mind to distill, to do its strange work over time. No snapshot, no series of images, could capture its life.

Walt Whitman wrote a beautiful little poem about a spider, and about the workings of consciousness:

A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.
And you, O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

This could be a description of the making of coherency from experience, as the mind does autonomically. It could describe the making of a poem, or the process of reaching beyond the isolation of subjectivity by means of these gossamer threads of inquiry and speculation to arrive at a kind of insight we might call scientific. None of these readings would exclude the others. That the spider serves so well as metaphor for the soul's musings places both these silent creatures in the same "vacant vast surrounding," places the soul in the world experientially, without condescension to the world and without rarification of the soul. I note the importance here of the complex psychology intrinsic to the self theistically understood. The speaker of the poem watches himself watching, understands that there is purpose in his attentiveness, that it is itself a gossamer thread finding a hold in the delicate strategy of exploration he sees in the spider. He beholds himself in his essential humanity, as solitary, as one given to musing and to discovering analogy and elegance where his attention rests.

Science tells us we have no souls. And science gives us no name and no way of accounting for the phenomenon of self-awareness that makes our thoughts, doubts, dreams, memories, and antipathies so interesting to us, and our frustrations with our faults and failures so acute. Granting that "the soul" as an idea might be culturally particular enough that it gives self-awareness a character not intrinsic to it. The classic soul is more ourselves than we are, a loving and well-loved companion, loyal to us uniquely, entrusted to us, to whom we entrust ourselves. We feel its yearnings, its musings, as a truer and more primary experience of ourselves than our ordinary consciousness can offer us. Traditionally souls are spoken of as saved or lost, being the immortal part of humankind, even though they are also thought of as unoffending, indeed, as offended against when we misuse our worldly agency. Freud's super-ego bears a superficial resemblance to the soul, the great difference being that the super-ego is the internalization of strictures and demands that are not one's own or friendly to one's well-being, and that intervene in the formation of a primary self. The old song says, "It is well with my soul." No song says "It is well with my super-ego." That would describe a state of utter capitulation to a harsh authority enforced by a submerged but dreadful guilt.

It is interesting to consider what we have received in exchange for the theistic world view of our ancestors. Psychological complexity is acknowledged in modern theories of the mind—in Freud's tripartite psyche, in notions of an un-evolved reptilian brain coiled at the base of consciousness, in bicameralism, and recently in the brain as a sort of

calculator making continuous and presumably accurate estimates of the organism's relative advantage, cost-benefit analysis in the terms of economics, the discipline whose prestige seems to have overwhelmed what remained of humanist impulses in this field. Complexity enters this schema because some undescribed mechanism intervenes to conceal our selfishness from ourselves, to allow us to believe that our generosity actually is generosity, and so on. Why, if self-interest is the unique and universal motive, any shame or blame would attach to it is one question. Another is, what would this system of concealment look like as biology or neurology, and would its complexity, its physiological cost, be repaid by concealments that hardly seem necessary in the first place, given the selfishness thesis. In any case, all this complexity takes place in isolation within the standard human skull, which is not a very pleasant place to be. I suppose this is both a source and a consequence of modernist malaise.

The modern world, insofar as it is proposed to humankind as its habitation, is too small, too dull, too meager for us. After all, we are very remarkable. We alone among the creatures have learned a bit of the grammar of the universe.

"My soul, by grace of God, has gone / Adventuring where marvels be." These are lines from a poem, "Pearl," written in the fourteenth century. The voice of the poem describes a dream vision of a girl child who has died. The speaker sees her as a lovely young woman by a river, in a paradise he cannot yet enter. The poem speaks beautifully and tellingly of such loss, acknowledging a depth of grief that is, finally, embraced in the consolations of a cosmic order that is as tender and profound as such sorrows would require. We might call this wish fulfillment, the projection of human hopes on an empty heaven. Or we might call it a vision of Being that is large and rich enough to accommodate the experience of human love and grief. How else to do justice to them? "Pearl" movingly evokes a young child's translucent loveliness, and pearls adorn the sleeve of the cosmic Christ. The garden where the child is buried is a faint but real promise of the paradise where her soul flourishes. The beauty we see in this world is a sign and portent of an ultimate beauty, and we are rightly enthralled by it. Beauty has no place in modern theories of the mind, nor do the pleasures of memory, thought, or perception, or the aesthetic pleasures. Endorphins are not adequate to filling this void. They only mean that pleasure happens, as I hope we all know, even without the word.

My argument is essentially that the universe of theism is large enough not only to admit of the great range of human emotion and imagination, pathos and grandeur, but to enhance these things, to value them even when they are never noticed or valued or, for that matter, expressed, in the whole of a mortal life. Unless it is to distinguish itself very sharply from theistic tradition, I have no idea why the various psychologies are alike in disallowing the more ingratiating human traits. Religion is represented as a repressive system from which modern thought is a liberation. Yet all these psychologies are bleakly determinist, and so poor in their view of the possible that it is impossible to guess what their version of a free act would look like. The notion that all behavior is essentially self-interested might liberate selfishness, but that would be no more than a slight deviation from a pattern of behavior that is inevitable in any case. If decency is merely feigned, the enabler of selfishness, it might be no deviation at all. I grant all the problems associated with the doctrine of predestination, and I find it a vastly deeper problem to be asked to subscribe to the idea that meaninglessness is irresistibly implanted in human nature, that super-ego will wrestle id to a draw, that the hand in the collection plate will appear to be putting something in, not taking something out. A better modernist anthropology might change my sense of all this, but as it is I think it is entirely appropriate to evaluate what there is on offer.

In case there are doubts, this really is an essay on the subject of intellectual integrity, a thing many of us have felt to be sorely lacking these days. Why is it so difficult to find the language to approach this subject? Well, these psychologies I mention imply or say outright that there is no mind. Then how do we speak of intellectualism? These psychologies imply or say outright that there is no self. Then how do we speak of integrity? The notion has caught on very widely that there are no facts, only interpretations. Truth itself is dissolving as a concept in an acid bath of idle cynicism. So to what standard are the ethically inclined to hold themselves? Who knows to what extent the "thought" of a period is what we take it to be. But modern thought especially has been made a curriculum and a catechism. There are no grounds for doubting its influence. Again, in the matter of intellect or ethicalism, it is conspicuously lacking in terms to address these things or to value them.

For a very long time it has been assumed that intellectual

integrity in the modern period demanded the rejection of religion. As corollary there is the assumption that we must adopt the worldview of the modern period. This subtle coercion, to embrace certain ideas on other grounds than their merits, might explain their survival despite their being, from a human point of view, desiccated things, deeply unsatisfactory. And this while brilliant science continuously sets before us a vaster, more cryptic and spectacular cosmos, the brilliant human mind being mirror and alembic of all this grandeur, as it has always been. The modern science of the mind is to science in general as a blighted twin to a living body, mimic life and thwarted development. I propose that this is true because it epitomizes "the modern" as a concept. It is first of all a worldview. The methods of the science that sponsors it presuppose its validity—the soul will never reveal itself to an fMRI, and poetry, prayers, painting, and architecture are inadmissible as evidence. These theories of the mind change, to the extent they do, as cultural styles change, not in the way of hypotheses that are winnowed and refined in the ordinary course of inquiry. (I use the word "mind" because their attentions to the brain yield, by their lights, insights of global validity into human nature, the kind of inwardness implied in a deceptive valuation of one's own motives, and so on. To say they learn this from scrutiny of the brain would be false. The idea goes back at least to Freud.)

Einstein's great mistake, the constant he added into his theory to make the equations work as he wanted and which he regretted ever afterward, has turned out to be no mistake at all but an anticipation of the effect of dark energy as anti-gravity. I skirt specifics because I don't understand them. But there is a point to my analogy. If a theoretical account of the order of things does not describe what reason or intuition propose to the understanding, then the factor that would correct for its deficiencies should be looked to, pondered. The modern world, insofar as it is proposed to humankind as its habitation, is too small, too dull, too meager for us. After all, we are very remarkable. We alone among the creatures have learned a bit of the grammar of the universe. Einstein was known to mention God from time to time, which need not imply theism in any traditional form, only the sense of a universe more intrinsically orderly, capacious, and finally unknowable, than theory and formula could capture. For him the Lord seems to have been another cosmological constant, an undemonstrated given necessary to allowing the reality he wished to describe its full character. We have in ourselves grounds for supposing that Being is vaster, more luminous, more consequential than we have allowed ourselves to imagine for many generations. No idea is authenticated by the fact that it hurts our feelings. Intellectual rigor is not inevitably reductionist. Intellectual integrity cannot oblige us to deny what is manifestly true. ■

Where the Mystery Lies

An Interview with Alice McDermott

Anthony Domestico

Readers of *Commonweal* will need little introduction to Alice McDermott—a frequent contributor and one of America's greatest living novelists. Her eighth and latest novel, *The Ninth Hour*, displays all the typical McDermott virtues: a plot that moves across decades and braids together several different plotlines and characters; a richly textured imagination of time and place (the novel opens in early-twentieth-century Brooklyn); a sympathetic and complicated representation of religion and desire, family and community, memory and hope.

The novel begins with a death—to be more precise, with the suicide of a thirty-two-year-old man named Jim—and follows the rippling effects of this act on a host of characters: Annie, Jim's young and pregnant wife; Sally, the daughter born in tragedy's wake; and a group of nuns from the Little Sisters of the Sick Poor, an order of nuns who aid Annie and care for Sally for many years to come.

I have loved all of McDermott's novels, but I love this one with particular force. Despite the lightness of touch—and there are few writers who write more lucidly or precisely than McDermott—there's a solidity to *The Ninth Hour*, the sense that McDermott has created a world that the reader can enter into and live within. Toward the end of the novel, one character tells another character a story about the past: "And he ended it all with a flourish, indicating with a sweep of his right hand the tin ceiling of the kitchen and the fine, five-bedroom house above it, as if the house, the brick and stone of it, proved the validity of all he had told her. As if the tale itself, only talk, only breath on air, had nevertheless brought both to this solid and irrefutable present where they were alone together in the middle of the night, alone and awake and—true for him, at least—in love." Out of words McDermott likewise has built something solid and irrefutably present. I spoke with McDermott about her novel over email.

Anthony Domestico: What in particular drew you to the Little Sisters of the Sick Poor?

Alice McDermott: The naming of such religious orders has always intrigued and enchanted me. I love the way the quaint humility of a name like "the Little Sisters" (or the Sister Servants or the Poor Clares or the Little Company) is juxtaposed with the ambition of the nuns' mission and the difficulty of their work. Initially, I set out to create a character, Sister St. Saviour, who embodies this contradiction: a woman who can embrace the tremendous humility inherent in the very name of her order, and yet has ego enough to believe herself fully capable of taking a stand against human suffering—against her church as well, whenever its rules and traditions contradict compassion and common sense.

But as I composed the novel, I saw that a single example of this, a single character, would not do justice to the complexity, the variety, of such vocations. I confess I was reluctant to add more—more nuns. As weary as I was of the Catholic writer label, and of the Irish-American-writer label, and the New York–writer label, I nevertheless found myself writing a novel about Catholic nuns serving a good many Irish Americans in Brooklyn simply because I wanted to write about selflessness and ego and the work women do. And so, in some way, the nuns took over, despite my efforts to resist them. I ended up creating, in fact, my own order of nuns—The Little Nursing Sisters of the Sick Poor, Congregation of Mary before the Cross—simply to accommodate all those aspects of the novel that I once promised myself I'd avoid.

AD: *The Ninth Hour* opens with a death. So, too, did your previous novel, *Someone*. Why begin this way? Cormac McCarthy has said that real literature deals seriously with "issues of life and death"; anything that doesn't—and his examples include the work of Proust and Henry James—doesn't really count. Would you agree? Does the novel have to play for existential stakes if it's to be great?

AM: In my experience, it's the novel itself, the story being told, that dictates how it opens. I can't imagine choosing to begin a novel with a death scene simply to signal to the reader that I'm out for greatness here—brace yourself. I agree that literature does indeed deal seriously with issues of life and death, with what it means to be human, which includes, of

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Alice McDermott

course, what it is to be mortal. (I recall once being asked by a reader, "Why do all your novels deal with someone who is going to die, or who knows someone who died, or with someone who is already dead?" Obtusely, perhaps, I replied that to my mind, the dead, the dying, and the acquaintances of the dead pretty much accounts for all of us.) But novelists should be free to let the emphasis fall where the story demands and greatness can be achieved by stories that deal predominantly with life (Proust? James?) as well as those that open or close or are generously scattered with death and dying (McCarthy). I can't recall offhand how many birth scenes Cormac McCarthy has written, but surely if we're playing for existential stakes, birth is as necessary a subject as death—and so, I suppose, an argument can be made that childhood and adolescence, love, romance, sex, marriage, middle age, old age are all fodder for real literature, since, being the stuff that takes place between life and death, they too are a part of the existential mix.

In my own case, the deaths that open both *Someone* and *The Ninth Hour* are very different: an accident due to illness in one, a suicide in the other. In *Someone*, the death serves as a memory marker for the narrator and as a thematic chord for the author, but is of little consequence to the events that follow. (In fact, its lack of consequence is the point.) But in *The Ninth Hour*, the suicide that begins the novel is, in many ways, the inciting event for all that follows.

AD: Where your novel begins with death, it ends with delight: "We felt her delight in us, which was familiar as well, delight in our presence, our living and breathing selves—a tonic for all sorrow." Delight is a word that comes up frequently in your work. What role does delight play in your writing life? And what kinds of delight do you look for in your reading?

AM: In the reading and writing life, delight, for me, is where the mystery lies. Easy enough to figure out how scenes of violence or tragedy or titillation or grossness or even sentimentality can move us, but how the written word elicits delight—what Nabokov calls that shiver in the spine—is much harder to calculate and define. What makes a sentence, a phrase, a moment, or a scene delightful? Something about recognizing the truth in it, something about hearing the music in it, something about understanding, intuitively perhaps, that the words are just right. It's not a matter of content, or even context—delight is not limited to scenes or descriptions of happiness or beauty—but of aesthetic appreciation of the thing (sentence, phrase, scene, detail, story) itself, the art of it. As a reader, I find it's that moment when I want to stop reading, and also that moment when I know I can't; it's when I want to buttonhole someone and say, "Listen to this," while at the same time hoping that no fellow human will intrude and make me lift my eyes from the page. It's recognizing something you've always known—or have always seen or have always felt—as if for the first time, all the while understanding that you would never have known or seen or felt this if it weren't for the writer's words. I can't say delight is what I look for in my reading, more accurate to say that it's what takes me by surprise and reminds me why I love the literary arts above all others.

As a writer, I'm too busy (and worried) to experience that delight while composing my own work, although, of course, I hope a reader will find something of it when the work is complete. But I do try to figure out where in their experiences certain characters of mine, who are not necessarily readers, and certainly (so far) not writers or artists, find an equivalent sensation: of delight, of astonishment, of whatever it is that briefly—and brevity seems essential—reassures us, connects us, sends a shiver of inarticulate recognition down our spines: Oh, yes: life.

AD: In a lovely essay in *Boston College Magazine*, you talked about the astonishment involved in writing a novel: "if in the course of delineating this fictional world, of making you see, I should discover, even as my narrator discovers, as my reader discovers, something absolutely astonishing...well, I'm

EMMAUS

I run in oddly warm December air
and chase the orange, evanescent sun.
Inhale, exhale (a runner's form of prayer),
I run in oddly warm December air.
A stranger joins me on the asphalt trail.
We speak in measured rhythm, then—he's gone.
I run in oddly warm December air,
My heart burns like the evanescent sun.

—Susan Delaney Spear

Susan Spear, poet and librettist, teaches poetry and creative writing at Colorado Christian University in Lakewood, Colorado. Her poems have appeared in Academic Questions, *the* Anglican Theological Review, Dappled Things, Measure, *the* Christian Century *and many other journals. Her first collection of poems will be published by Wipf and Stock in early 2018.*

as surprised at this as you are." What most surprised you in the writing of this novel? Was there a particular character or plotline that moved in an unexpected direction?

AM: As I mentioned, the nuns more or less took over this story, which meant, of course, that pretty much everything about the novel began to move in an unexpected direction. And the direction it moved in was, in many ways, underground—not merely to the realm of the dead, where Jim, the suicide, resides for much of the book, but to the mostly unseen realm of women's work—literally, the convent's basement laundry and figuratively the sisters' daily care for the poor: poor women and children, especially. The story moved underground thematically as well: to the idea of buried truths, lost histories, great sacrifices, and sins gone unnoticed, unrecorded, unsung.

AD: *The Ninth Hour* is deeply interested in time, and my first question about time is technical. How did you discover what kind of narrative structure this novel required? There's a relatively linear ordering of time here: we start with Jim's suicide and then follow how this death affects various lives—Sally's, Mrs. Tierney's, Sister Jeanne's—over the years in the novel. Yet at various points, you flash forward, sometimes decades into the future, showing us, for instance, what Sister Jeanne will look and sound like when she's "an old woman." You've done such flash forwards before; I'm thinking in particular of *After This*. What risks and rewards do such temporal jumps offer?

AM: I'm not sure I would call the more contemporary scenes here flash forward, as was the case in *After This*, but rather I think of the bulk of the novel as a long look back, through the scant recollections of childhood to a more expansive, more thorough, more vivid, perhaps more "present" depiction of the past. After much trial and error, I discovered that I was looking for a structure that would align itself in some way with the faith of the nuns—religious faith in general, I suppose. I was looking for a way to convey the certainty, the vividness, with which the faithful regard things unseen (which includes the past), while at the same time acknowledging the somewhat patchwork and uncertain way in which such faith is achieved—the whole through-a-glass-darkly part of belief. The novel is built on the collective narrators' own experiences, on the stories they've been told, phrases they have heard, anecdote, speculation, even a bit of research, but none of these elements can completely account for the vividness and the certainty of the story's linear narrative—a narrative that must, in some ways, be taken as "accurate" on faith alone.

The technical risks of such temporal jumps are many: an author can appear manipulative, the shifts can seem arbitrary, and the poor reader can get lost. The rewards, as far as this particular novel is concerned, remain to be seen. I hope there's a sense of both historical narrative (without the "hey, I researched this" excess) and memoir (without the "ain't I fascinating?" narcissism), but also an impression that the fiction—the reconstituted, the imagined past—has more authority, is more compelling, than the facts as they are known by the current generation.

AD: Another question about time. Within the first few pages, we learn that Jim "liked to refuse time": "Sometimes just the pleasure of being an hour or two late was enough to remind him that he, at least, was his own man, that the hours of his life—and what more precious commodity did he own?—belonged to himself alone." How do you yourself find ways to refuse time, to keep this precious commodity your own? Do you, like Sister Lucy, see a conflict between "the ordinary hour" (the time you spend, say, as a teacher, mother, and citizen) and "the silence and beauty of the contemplative life" (the time you spend as an artist)? Or would you want to refuse such a distinction?

AM: I'm as grateful for the time I spend as an artist—alone at last—as I am for the time—what's for dinner?—that relieves me of that obligation. The fact that I don't always get to choose when I can have an artist's life and when I have to be a teacher, mother, citizen seems a small price to pay for the privilege of getting to spend some hours in both worlds.

But, of course, to consider your question another way: writing fiction is, in and of itself, a way to refuse time. In literature, no scene—no now—is ever lost because it can always be revisited. To put it very simply: old Sister Jeanne is young Sister Jeanne again when you turn the page. Un-

certain, or even partial, recollection is restored as vivid moment. Fiction (and poetry, of course) preserves not only forgotten details, or lost communities, or days gone by, but the precise emotional experience as well—or, to borrow from Wallace Stevens, fiction and poetry preserve what we felt at what we saw. In this way, the novel, the story, the poem is itself a stay against time.

AD: A few final time-related questions. At one point, the narrator writes, "For Sister Jeanne the first hour of any day, the hour of Lauds, was always the holiest. It was the hour she felt closest to God, saw Him in the gathering light, in the new air, in the stillness of the street." Do you have a favorite time of day, a time that you find holiest or most alive? And how do you think Catholicism has affected your own understanding and experience of time?

AM: I'm no morning person, so I probably gave Sister Jeanne her preference for Lauds out of envy and admiration and in an effort to understand a character who entered the story as an enigma to me. I can't say I have a favorite hour myself; every time of day has its appeal. My complaint is simply that there are never enough of them.

But certainly Catholicism has affected the way I think about time. To have been raised in a tradition in which the phrases "daily bread" or "now and at the hour of our death" have been on my lips since I was very young; to have attended Mass all my life, where—even on Christmas, even at weddings, even in the glorious days of high summer—Christ's suffering and death, his last supper, is recalled and reenacted; to have the course of every year marked by the forty days of Lent, Holy Week, Ordinary Time, the four weeks of Advent, etc.—I don't know how you can be a Catholic and not have your faith traditions shape how you think about, and write about, time.

One of the characters in this novel, Mrs. Tierney—perhaps a character whose faith I best understand—loves the church for the way it orders the passage of days, even as she is grateful that her busy life allows her to fall asleep before she gets to the part of the Hail Mary that reminds her that her joyous and full-blooded now will at some point be met by the hour of our death.

AD: *The Ninth Hour* is when the church remembers Christ's death on the cross—when, as Sister Jeanne puts it, we remember "the madness with which suffering [is] dispersed in the world." If you had to name some great Ninth Hour works of art—novels, poems, paintings, or films that ask how we account for evil and suffering in a world that has been made out of love—what would they be?

AM: The poems of W. H. Auden's *Horae Canonicae* come to mind—especially, of course, his "Nones," with its emphasis on an uneasy silence in the aftermath of great suffering (it is barely three / Mid-afternoon, yet the blood / Of our sacrifice is already dry on the grass; we are not prepared / For silence so sudden and so soon). It is this sense of stillness and uncertainty that intrigues me about the Ninth Hour, the time immediately following Christ's death—the time when even the faithful must hold their breath, wait in the sudden stillness to see if their belief will be justified or defeated.

I see in this stillness and uncertainty a parallel of sorts to our post-religious world, my own post-religious generation. There's the wariness, if not outright dismissal, of the promises of faith, or of the beliefs of an older generation, and at the same time a kind of dumb silence before the question of suffering, before the meaninglessness death brings to the human enterprise. A reluctance even to speak about such things. I think of this silence as either hope holding its breath, or cool logic acknowledging that there's nothing to be said: we are physical creatures who suffer and die.

On a somewhat lighter note: I wanted to title this novel *The Hour of None*, mostly because I liked the way the words looked on the page and how "None" played off the sound of no one, while also evoking the idea of knowing/not knowing. But I had to consider the reality that some readers would not understand that the Latin "None" is pronounced known, and thus they would misread the title as a very bad pun for a book about nuns. Language, I've learned, does not always cooperate with a writer's intentions.

AD: In that same essay for *Boston College Magazine*, you describe "the simple miracle brought to you by that trinity of writer/narrator/reader, that miracle of seeing together what does not exist in the real world." What does your ideal reader look like? What habits of mind or soul do you think the best readers possess?

AM: I certainly appreciate the virtue of patience in a reader. (In exchange for which, I won't let my reader run the risk of mispronouncing "None.") Oddly enough, I like a little reluctance, too. There should be, at the start, some wariness on the reader's part, some hesitation to be taken out of "the real world," to be taken in by a story. Fiction that intends to be something other than entertainment has a certain obligation, I think, to convince the reader, every time, that what is to be evoked—character, experience, idea—is worthy of his or her consideration, intellectual energy, close attention. I've always been the kind of reader who must finish every book she begins, but more and more I find I'm with the reader who says to an author, affectionately, if impatiently, "Look, I've got too much to do today to just stand here watching you do handstands and backflips. Either we're in this together, looking for something essential, or I'm gone." (So maybe I agree with Cormac McCarthy after all.)

I suppose I believe the best readers are those who understand we're in this together, writer/narrator/reader, all looking to discover whatever it is that brings us to say (sadly, bitterly, joyously, amusedly, resignedly), "Ah, yes: life." ■

Rand Richards Cooper

Not So Great Escape

'NOVITIATE'

In either a film or a novel, the challenge of capturing the past is to re-create, and allow us to inhabit, outlooks, practices, and passions that have evaporated—that strike us now as benighted or strange. In that strangeness we measure the reality of the human being in circumstances importantly different from our own. The challenge looms especially large for any director hoping to convey to an American audience the lives of cloistered nuns, those "brides of Christ," as they were lived half a century ago.

Novitiate announces its intention in the opening voice-over, in which a teenaged girl, Cathleen, confesses with whispered urgency, "You are all I could ever want." She is addressing no less than God himself. Months later, as she takes the vows at the Sisters of the Blessed Rose monastery, she will be asked the ritual questions: "What do you seek? What do you desire?" Writer-director Margaret Betts firmly places the emphasis on that desire, reminding us that faith as experienced by those who pledged their lives to Christ and the church often was driven by passion and the wish for spiritual intimacy. "Beneath it all, we were women in love," Cathleen comments, from a point of uncertain retrospect.

The setting is 1964, and Cathleen (Margaret Qualley) is seventeen. Growing up in rural Tennessee, abandoned by her carousing father and raised by an irreligious, profane, smoking-and-drinking mom (Julianne Nicholson), she wins a scholarship to a parochial school, where her shy intensity and meditative bent draw the attention of a quietly charismatic nun. Soon, to the baffled dismay of her mother, Cathleen decides to hie herself to the abbey and devote her life to God.

Novitiate seeks to explore the contrast between the daily severity of a life under vows and the intensity of the passion that powers it. The life is one of extreme enclosure—the abbess (Melissa Leo) boasts to the new postulants that she hasn't left the grounds in forty years. The would-be sisters learn a rigidly structured system designed to foster spirituality through meditation and submission. To this end they receive training in such practices as "custody of the eyes"; prayer recitations and singing of canticles; proper postures for walking; the strict observation of Grand Silence, complete with sign language; and extreme penitential practices such as self-flagellation.

Margaret Qualley in Novitiate

SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

It is a world almost entirely without men; the priest who says Mass—his back turned to the faithful—is little more than a distant mumble. Betts gives us a few scenes in which Cathleen and her friends—teenagers, after all—engage in coltish fun; one fellow postulant gigglingly reveals that she decided to become a nun after watching Audrey Hepburn in *The Nun's Story*. But mostly what we observe is the dour inculcation of solemnity. It is a life in which stray thoughts are enemies to be shunned, and the line between the legitimate ecclesiastical power that traces to God and the power that is a mere emanation of someone's personal lust for authority gets routinely blurred. "Put down your hand, Sister," snarls the Reverend Mother, when one of her new charges dares to ask for a small clarification. "Postulants don't ask questions."

Well, that was then. That priest's back is turned, of course, because this is 1964—just halfway through the Second Vatican Council, a distant theological and ecclesial rumble that Mother Superior is doing all in her power to ignore. Betts hangs her film's drama on the unfolding implications of that convocation; her goal, presumably, is to evoke the winds of change that swept through the Catholic world, and the hopes and anxieties it provoked. Might one grant that finding a way to dramatize three-plus years of theological debate and church reform is not easy? *Novitiate*, at any rate, flounders badly in the attempt. Lines of acceptance and resistance are too neatly embodied in the antagonistic figures of the rigid Mother Superior and the wryly ironic, liberalizing archbishop (played by that able veteran of priestly roles, Denis O'Hare); their confrontation plays out in a laughable scene in which he admonishes her to drop "all

that medieval stuff...or else." Repeatedly we watch as the abbess receives ominous envelopes, containing more bad news from Rome, that she either refuses to open or sweeps from her desk in fury. Drat those evil, modernizing bishops! This aspect of *Novitiate* comes off as glibly topical, the filmic equivalent of a *Time* magazine article.

Better is the close attention paid to Cathleen's spiritual yearnings. Betts shows great tact in portraying the urgency of the girl's desire for a religious life, and in evoking the perplexity that arises when her need for human contact puts her in conflict with the rigors of her training. The collision of a young woman's erotic impulses with the stringencies of traditional Catholic religious formation is ripe material for nunsploitation, with its fantasies of suppressed female lusts. But Betts is as doggedly earnest as her novice heroine, and forces us to suppress any impulse of mischievousness and to appreciate Cathleen's authentic gift of spirit.

Unfortunately, far less tact inheres in the portrayal of those charged with bringing that gift to bear. Melissa Leo's performance is intense, but the role, all fuming rage and shriveled, shrewish spirit, trots out every tired trope of crazed female authority. There is something distinctly Nazi-like in the way the abbess and two hench-sisters march in to the chapel, as the postulants are chanting a prayer, to lead off two who have fallen short—as if taking them to be shot. You half expect the three to have SS insignia affixed to their habits. The same goes for a scene in which, enraged by the latest communiqué from her archbishop, the abbess humiliates a postulant, forcing her to grovel, weeping, on her knees.

Betts herself is not religious—she decided to make the film after reading the letters of St. Teresa of Kolkata, impressed by the intimate nature of the nun's yearning for God. It is significant that the film's two most moving scenes both depict moments in which monastic life oppresses Cathleen: one in which she is overcome with emotion during a visit from her mother, and another in which she and a fellow novice, in an illicit middle-of-the-night encounter, give in to an overwhelming need for physical solace. But no person is on hand to place these human emotions into any spiritual context that might alleviate the burden of confusion they create—only the sadistic Mother Superior, doubling down on the punishment.

One can't help but warm to the luminous performance of Margaret Qualley (daughter of actress Andie MacDowell) as Sister Cathleen. But the religious life as Betts depicts it is little more than a stifling regimen of deprivation; there is none of the joy found in such films as *Into Great Silence*, that convey the deep satisfactions of spiritual asceticism. That poetical study of the lives of Carthusian monks provided an authentic glimpse of eternity, and did so with a rapturousness that left you thirsty for a more reverential way of being in the world. *Novitiate* sets its sights not on eternity, but pathology. When we are told, in an afterword, that ninety thousand nuns renounced their vocation in the aftermath of Vatican II, it's hard to know what we're supposed to think, aside from "*They're free!*"

Perhaps a better comparison is *Ida*, Pawel Pawlikowski's 2013 exploration of life in a dreary Polish convent, also in the early 1960s. Here, again, Betts's film falls far short. Pawlikowski exploited the tension between powerful opposites—the ethereal vs. the earthy and erotic; the enclosed safety of the cloister vs. the shapeless dangers of the world outside; the rigidity of Communist-era bureaucracy vs. the sexy fluidity of jazz—and did so in a way that heightened the mystery of faith, rather than flattening it. Ida honored the search for something sacramental, and gave us a church that, however imperfectly, embodied it. *Novitiate* cartoonishly construes the abbey as a prison, with Mother Superior as its brutal warden, Nurse Ratched in a veil; the film leaves us no choice but to root for Cathleen's escape.

The Catholic News Service awards *Novitiate* the classification of O, for "morally offensive." I'd give it a D—for disappointing. ■

William H. Pritchard

‘She Lived to Read’

The Collected Essays of Elizabeth Hardwick
Selected by Daryl Pinckney
New York Review Books, $19.95, 645 pp.

“She taught by quotation and aside, citation and remark, stone down the well and echo,” writes Daryl Pinckney in his crisp introduction to six-hundred pages of Elizabeth Hardwick’s essays. The collection provides an opportunity to think about and appreciate the woman whose forty years of contributions to the *New York Review of Books* ran from that journal’s inception in 1963 to her death in 2003. Hardwick herself, Pinckney tells us, admired Susan Sontag for her “appreciative” way of introducing European writers to an American audience. Her own subjects were more American mainstream, some of whom we had forgotten about—like Ring Lardner, whom she reintroduces to us in four packed pages.

The impression overall of this collection is of an enormously welcoming literary imagination, that of—as Hardwick has been called—a writer’s writer. Certainly Hardwick’s sentences about Lardner look to have been carefully attended to: she writes that his “odd stories” were told with “curious speech, rush of situation, explosion of insult.” In Lardner’s world, she continues:

> Even the sports world is degraded and athletes are likely to be sadists, crooks, or dumbbells. The vision is thoroughly desperate. All the literature of the thirties and forties does not contain such pure subversion, snatched on the run from the common man and his old jokes.

Writing about the letters of another writer who needs re-introducing, Hart Crane, she delivers a breathless encomium: “Crane’s letters are vivid in every respect—responsive, humorous, beautifully written, fresh—everything and more. The sheer power of mind they reveal is dazzling.” Or there is Bernard Berenson, who lived with “the silky regularity and pleasurable concentration of energies that are at once opulent and sacrificial—the prudence of the sensual.”

Such sentences remind us that Hardwick was a novelist who produced writing attractive in its own “pleasurable concentration of energies.” If she brings to mind Mary McCarthy, it is not solely, or mainly, that they were both exceedingly smart women, but that in each case the “creative” impulse was as strong as the critical. Similar claims could be made for Norman Mailer or Gore Vidal.

Near the beginning of Hardwick’s career as a critic-reviewer she was fortunate enough to latch on to the *New York Review of Books*, of which she and her husband, Robert Lowell, were partial founders. This meant that she never had to worry about word limit; and, as may be seen by the length of many of these pieces, that freedom proved a mixed blessing. (In addition to her essays, *NYRB* has republished her third and best-known novel, *Sleepless Nights*, plus a selection of her “New York” stories, also edited by Pinckney.) Along with literary subjects, she took on American events from the ’60s and ’70s—the march at Selma, the Watts riots, the death of Martin Luther King Jr. These efficient and well-observed pieces serve to bring back bits from a vanished, troubled time (of course the trouble has not vanished), but don’t incite much further reflection about the subjects in question.

In his selection of pieces, Pinckney has slanted the collection toward the literary; so a plausible question concerns just what kind of literary critic Hardwick aspired to be. Again the obvious comparison is with Mary McCarthy. In a review of an early collection of McCarthy pieces, Hardwick writes that McCarthy wanted to be “noticed,” indeed to be “spectacular,” and worked toward that end with “a sort of trance-like seriousness” that Hardwick wondered about:

> There is something puritanical and perplexing in her lack of relaxation, her utter refusal to give an inch of the ground of her opinion. She *cannot conform*, cannot often like whatever her peers like.

One would not characterize Hardwick herself in similar terms. She doesn’t aspire in her criticism to be “spectacular”; “puritanical” fits her not at all; and the confident ease of her writing, while not to be thought of as “relaxation,” gives off little of the tense, embattled air to be detected more than once in McCarthy. Reading Hardwick gives one the sense that this is a writer who, among other things, is positively enjoying herself. After McCarthy died, Hardwick saluted her with a tribute that admired her “wit” and her “great learning.” Hardwick herself has plenty of wit, and if great learning isn’t the first term that comes to mind in assessing her, a reader of these essays will be convinced of how wide and effortless seems the application of her knowledge—knowledge that consists of nothing less than a lifetime of serious reading. As Pinckney puts it, succinctly, “She lived to read.”

He also notes that for Hardwick “What mattered most in the end was a writer’s language.” I don’t exactly disagree, yet would want her to specify more carefully how language mattered to her as a critic. Again, McCarthy’s practice is a useful contrast. There is nothing in Hardwick’s literary criticism to compare in intensity with McCar-

thy's demonstration of the centrality of language to, say, the novels of Vladimir Nabokov or Ivy Compton-Burnett. McCarthy's penchant for the spectacular may be observed in the grand opening of her brilliant analysis of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*: "*Pale Fire* is a jack-in-the-box, a Fabergé gem, a clockwork toy, a chess problem, an infernal machine, a trap to catch reviewers, a cat-and-mouse game, a do-it-yourself kit." The writing calls attention to itself in a way that Hardwick's seldom does, and it is prelude to a lengthy, exacting account of the linguistic invention Nabokov wields so mightily in that book.

When Hardwick writes about Nabokov, as she does in a review of his *Lectures on Literature*, she calls "the brilliant *Pale Fire*...entirely a deranged annotation of a dreadful poem." (But surely John Shade's sometimes quite moving poem deserves something better than "dreadful.") She quotes Nabokov declaring about Dickens, "Let us look at the web and not the spider," and ends her review by stating, "The web, the illimitable web, is what these lectures are about." Yet one seldom feels that Hardwick is wholly committed to exploring the "web" of whatever novelist she takes up. In "The Foster Children," for example, she admires a number of Henry James's novels and stories in which children play a central part. After surveying them agreeably enough, she closes with these words: "The fictions show an acute disillusionment with family life, perhaps a bachelor's cool eye on the common sentiments." A reasonable conclusion, surely, but it isn't arrived at through close looking at Jamesian sentences.

In considering the contents of these essays, one notes how wholly poets and poetry are excluded from Hardwick's attention. Since she must have been able to write for the *New York Review* about more or less whatever she pleased, it looks like a conscious avoidance. When she does treat a poet (Sylvia Plath, for instance), it is on grounds of her gender. Elizabeth Bishop appears as a writer of short fiction rather than poems. And when a writer seems to ask for close attention to a literary style that has affinities with poetry—Katherine Anne Porter is a case in point—Hardwick hesitates. Noting Porter's "purity of style," she then calls it "not so easy to define," and concludes that "the writing is not plain and yet it is not especially decorative either; instead it is clear, fluent, and untroubled." That's as far as she goes in assessing a literary style.

Elizabeth Hardwick in 1967

EVERETT COLLECTION HISTORICAL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

It is worth reminding ourselves that Hardwick began as a novelist writing in a realistic style. It wasn't until after Robert Lowell's death that she brought out what most consider her most distinctive fiction, *Sleepless Nights*, a shifting, kaleidoscopic account of a young woman named Elizabeth and her memories of New York City. A sleazy hotel, the Hotel Schuyler, is introduced thus:

> The Automat with its woeful, watery macaroni, its breaded meat loaf, the cubicles of drying sandwiches made from mud, glue, and leather, from these textures you make your choice. The miseries of the deformed diners and their revolting habits; they were necessary like a sewer, like the Bowery, Klein's, 14th Street. Every great city is a Lourdes where you hope to throw off your crutches but meanwhile must stumble along on them, hobbling under the protection of the shrine.

In introducing the New York Review edition of *Sleepless Nights*, Geoffrey O'Brien says that the novel enlarges on Hardwick's earlier ones by "allowing itself the structural and stylistic freedoms of her literary essays." Well and good; but the effect overall is a series of highly written paragraphs, some more "brilliant" than others (and some that invite skipping). Yet it is nonetheless true that the leisurely, darkly sardonic, and noticing pace of paragraphs like the Automat one consorts happily with the novelistic way in which Hardwick writes, as a critic, about novels.

By that I mean that Hardwick is such a gifted, easy writer that her very facility may take its toll on whatever verdict she has to offer as a critic. One example is a thirteen-page essay on Philip Roth, following the 1997 publication of *American Pastoral*. The curious thing about the essay is how little of it is devoted to a consideration of that novel. Instead we get eight pages of run-up on Roth's previous books, with brief mentions of *Portnoy* and longer treatments of *Operation Shylock* and *Sabbath's Theater*, the two immediate predecessors of *American Pastoral*. In her opening paragraph Hardwick notes the centrality of sex to Roth's

novels—"Anywhere in every manner, a penitential workout on the page with no thought of backaches, chafings, or phallic fatigue. Indeed the novels are prickled like a sea urchin with the spines and a fuzz of many indecencies." Are we invited to be a little censorious of this penitential workout, to look at the spines and fuzz of these indecencies with amused, perhaps tolerant condescension?

When Hardwick finally gets to *American Pastoral*, it is to tell us about the cultist aspects of American revolutionists in the 1960s and the devastated picture of Newark after the 1967 riots. Thus far we're not sure just what attitude she's taking toward the novel, and the essay's sudden conclusion doesn't clear things up. She calls it a "Dreiserian chronicle," yet no literary style could be more different from Roth's brilliant performance in sentences and paragraphs than the workmanlike piling-up of events in a Dreiser novel. As Hardwick closes her essay, we still await some sort of critical judgment on the novel. We get, instead, her reflection that "still, the saga of the Levov family is a touching creative act and in the long line of Philip Roth's fiction can be rated PG, suitable for family viewing—more or less."

Why this skittish avoidance of an evaluation, and instead the silly business about PG rating? It's of a piece with the opening paragraph and its sea urchin, spines, and fuzz. And it illuminates why, for all her cleverness and humorous reflection, Hardwick sometimes disappointed as a critic. Roving around without a word limit in the *New York Review*, she was ever readable; but there remains something inconclusive and blurred about her literary judgments. She could never stop being charming, entertaining, ironic, and more than once these qualities led her into settling for less ambitious literary judgments. Too much of a writer's writer, perhaps? ■

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Charles K. Wilber

Make America Keynesian Again

A Rabble of Dead Money

The Great Crash and the Global Depression, 1929–1939

Charles R. Morris

Public Affairs, $29.99, 416 pp.

Charles Morris, a lawyer and former banker, has written a history of the Great Depression (1929–39) in the United States. His analysis in *A Rabble of Dead Money* locates the origins of that crisis in the rapid, unsustainable economic growth in 1920s Europe and the United States. This is popular history but also tackles tough issues both of economic history and economic theory. Morris does not neglect the human side of the depression, with its massive level of unemployment, hunger marches, bread lines, and mass migration from rural farms to the cities of the North and the West Coast. While some sections of the book will be challenging for the uninitiated, it is an essential account of events vital for us to understand, especially in the wake of our own economic calamities, and is warmly recommended even for those without a deep background in economics.

The debate over the causes of the Great Depression was vigorous from the start and has never been settled. Morris helpfully details many of those arguments. He is concerned primarily with the specific factors and policies that led to this particular economic depression and what made it so deep and so long. As a result the detail can be exhausting in its complexity. In frustration you want to say, "So everything causes everything!" However, at the bottom of all these debates is a fundamental question: Is a free-market economy inherently stable and able to ensure full employment over time, or is it unstable and given to periodic booms with rapid growth and low unemployment and busts when unemployment rises and goods cannot be sold?

Laissez faire was the dominant view of economics in both Great Britain and the United States at the time. This is the belief that there is an inherent stability in a market economy, that supply creates its own demand, and that full employment is the norm. What may appear as the destructive effects of market operations to those who experience them—the loss of jobs or industries, say—are merely transitory by-products of the

Unemployed men outside a Chicago soup kitchen during the Great Depression

U.S. INFORMATION AGENCY

market's creativity in constantly forcing increases in efficiency and productivity.

The collapse of the stock market and then the onslaught of the depression in the early 1930s upended this view of the economy. When the U.S. unemployment rate hit 25 percent in 1933, economists and policymakers were ripe for a new vision and a new social philosophy. In the public's eye the fundamental problem was that after 150 years of economic growth under a free-market economy, two-thirds of the population was still, in President Franklin Roosevelt's words, "ill housed and ill fed."

In addition, this failure occurred not just in the United States but throughout the whole market system. Rather than growth and progress being spurred by market-based international institutions, these institutions were a central factor in propagating a world-wide depression.

While the story begins in Europe after World War I, as Morris so vividly demonstrates, the actual collapse begins in October and November of 1929, the months of the stock-market crash and the initial phase of the depression: a three-year period followed when bank failures would become commonplace (9,000 out of the 24,700 banks in existence in 1930 had gone under by the end of 1933); when jobs would dissipate as if into thin air; when debts would become insufferable; and when prices would begin to drop (wholesale prices in the United States dropped 16 percent by the summer of 1930). This price decline particularly was a major obstacle to recovery because the expectations businesses had for profits, which influence orders to manufacturers, were continually lowered since no one could foresee when, and at what level, the fall would come to an end. It also meant that the real value of debts rose, making repayment more difficult. The most frightening aspect of all was that the system could apparently do nothing to help itself.

John Maynard Keynes's economics and Roosevelt's New Deal provided a theory and program to save the market economy by using government intervention to stimulate investment and aggregate demand and correct for large-scale unemployment. One of the cornerstones of Keynes's theory was his treatment of investment. Economists had believed that as the interest rate dropped, borrowing for investment would increase. Keynes, on the other hand, argued forcefully that investment decisions were much more closely linked with what he called "animal spirits." The term suggested fragility and instability, something more than rational calculation. Keynes had ample evidence for his case in the Depression, for even though investment was sorely needed and the interest rate had fallen below one percent, there was still minimal investment. No sane business would invest, regardless of the interest rate, if convinced that the project would incur losses.

In addition to his argument about the interest rate and investment, Keynes rejected the notion that wage reductions would lead to increases in employment. Instead, he argued that wages are a part of aggregate demand, in addition to being a part of production costs. If wages fall, aggregate demand and sales also will fall. If sales fall, profits will decline and firms will demand less labor. Thus Keynes argued that decentralized decision making by millions of consumers and businesses would add up to full employment only by accident. There are no automatic mechanisms pushing the capitalist economy toward full employment, no invisible hand that makes it all work. To Keynes it was not at all surprising that the economy was mired in a state of high unemployment with no mechanism to lift itself out.

In the United States it was not until 1933, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt assumed the presidency, that the deterioration in living conditions and economic understanding began to turn itself around. This certainly was not because Roosevelt had been blessed with a vision of the intricate workings of the economic system. He was, however, a creature of his times and realized, along with his counterparts in European capitals, that only one economic agent could possibly provide an avenue of escape for the system: the central government itself.

It had by then become acutely obvious that the isolated, atomistic activity of individual producers and consumers was not going to generate a substantial economic recovery, at least not in any acceptable time frame. While unemployment remained high right up to the war, the resulting massive government spending was seen as evidence that Keynes was right and that government-spurred demand could correct for the market economy's periodic booms and busts. However, the true believers in free markets both in and out of the economics profession never gave up their belief in the stability of the free-market economy or their claim that it was government mishandling that allowed the downturn to become a depression.

These defenses of laissez faire received major support from Milton Friedman and Anna Schwartz's book, *A Monetary History of the United States*. The depth of the Depression, they ar-

gued, was the direct and inevitable result of a drastic decline in the money supply from 1929 to 1933, resulting from misguided government policy. Free-market economists now had reason to claim that the economic system had actually been self-stabilizing all along! Only government errors had caused the catastrophe of the 1930s. Even though the Friedman-Schwartz claims were far from universally accepted, the rehabilitation of pre-Keynesian, laissez-faire economics was now well underway.

Despite Richard Nixon's declaration that "we are all Keynesians now" the argument continues to this day, and his claim now seems like the last gasp of an era about to give way to the greed and individualism of the Reagan years—the consequences of which are still with us.

Morris covers all this and much more in just about four hundred pages. Do I have disagreements? A few here and there but only two of substance. His analysis of the U.S. domestic economy during the 1920s is more positive than warranted. Workers wages were badly lagging behind productivity gains, leading to increasing income inequality. This in turn held back the demand for the ever-growing production of consumer goods, which was a factor in putting a break on the economic boom. In addition, as in his earlier book on the Great Recession of 2008, *The Two Trillion Dollar Meltdown*, he minimizes the role of the financial sector in paving the way for the stock-market collapse and for that collapse to lead to the ensuing Great Depression. Keynes had a better take on the situation when he wrote in *The General Theory*: "Speculators may do no harm as bubbles on a steady stream of enterprise. But the position is serious when enterprise becomes the bubble on a whirlpool of speculation. When the capital development of a country becomes a by-product of the activities of a casino, the job is likely to be ill-done." ■

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Regina Munch

Share This Protest

Twitter and Tear Gas

The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest

Zeynep Tufekci

Yale University Press, $26, 360 pp.

In 2009, a group of Harvard researchers made an accidental discovery. While building a computer program to read Chinese text, they realized that they were able to track what the Chinese government would censor and what it would not. First, they looked at social-media posts that criticized the government or government officials; it seemed a natural place to start. But this wasn't what was being censored. What really got the attention of China's hundred thousand censors was one word: "protest." It isn't the words that the Chinese government fears—it's the actions those words might enable.

Zeynep Tufekci, author of *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, tells the story of these Harvard researchers and many others to explain how words on social media turn into actions. Professor at the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina, Tufekci has participated in movements as various as the Zapatista uprising, the protests in Egypt's Tahrir Square in 2011, Istanbul's Gezi Park protests in 2013, and Occupy Wall Street. She recounts the hopeful, almost giddy atmosphere at the beginning of the Arab Spring, and the possibilities opened up by technologies such as Twitter. "Activists were able to overcome censorship, coordinate protests, organize logistics, and spread humor and dissent with an ease that would have seemed miraculous to earlier generations," she writes. "Thanks to digital technologies, ordinary people have new means of broadcasting—the potential to reach millions of people at once." Moreover, the pervasiveness of cell-phone cameras has given private citizens the ability to document protests or violence and spread information instantly. The "traditional gatekeepers" of the media—newspapers, magazines, official state sources, etc.—lose some of their ability to dictate how protests should be understood.

Social media also have the potential to decrease "pluralistic ignorance," the phenomenon of people being kept apart to ensure that they won't unite and pose a threat to established power. Through Twitter hashtags especially, it's possible to overcome feelings of powerlessness by connecting with people who think or feel as you do.

The ability to find a group of like-minded individuals almost instantly changes the dynamic of any political movement. Today mobilization tends not to be directed from the top down by an organizing committee; rather, it is horizontal, becoming what thousands or tens of thousands make it. For example, during the 2011 Tahrir Square protests in Egypt, protesters were in desperate need of medical supplies. Ahmed Abulhassan, a pharmacology student who was not involved in the protests, created a Twitter profile, @Tahrirsupplies, and used Twitter's "mention" function to engage activists. The new profile gathered information about needs and supplies in one place, coordinating suppliers and deliveries in real time. Tufekci emphasizes the novelty of this: an ordinary person, not a prominent activist or even someone with very many Twitter followers, was able to coordinate a global network.

One result of the use of social media is that the global networks forged online often remain in place, and can be quickly mobilized again. Tufekci describes this phenomenon as a "global antiauthoritarian protest culture." Not only do people travel to participate in new or ongoing actions, but those dealing

A protester holding a placard in Tahrir Square during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution

with one issue can share knowledge and resources with the politically sympathetic elsewhere. These networks allow groups continents apart to offer advice to one another. Palestinian protesters, for example, advised those demonstrating against police brutality in Ferguson, Missouri, on how to handle tear-gas attacks.

Tufekci is quick to point out that technology is not inherently good, bad, or even neutral. Rather, "technology alters the landscape in which human social interaction takes place, [and] shifts the power and the leverage between actors." She notes that although the horizontal nature of social media can be a solution to the problem of state- or elite-controlled media, it presents problems of its own. Millions of screens in millions of hands can create an information glut, making it difficult to sort out what is true or false. Fake news, indeed.

Compounding this challenge is the nature of the algorithms used by sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Information is not presented chronologically, but displayed using difficult-to-understand formulae written by social-media companies. When an algorithm promotes one already-popular post, other posts can be buried, regardless of their urgency or veracity. During the Ferguson protests of 2014, Facebook was algorithmically controlled while Twitter still displayed posts chronologically. Because information could not be buried on Twitter, word about the protests spread quickly throughout the world. Meanwhile, on Facebook, "it was as if nothing had happened." As Tufekci reminds us, these social media sites are first of all businesses—their bottom line is acquiring users and gaining advertising revenue from page views, not advancing an ideological agenda.

Tufekci uses "signaling theory," originally a biological term describing the ways living things send and perceive threats, to explain the unique character of contemporary protest. She compares the 1956 Montgomery bus boycotts to today's demonstrations. Back then, building a movement took time and effort: flyers had to be photocopied, participants had to commit in advance, and face-to-face interactions were vital. As a result, strong networks were built, making it more likely that a movement would last. Contrasted with today's short-lived, social-media-inspired coalitions, the pre-internet era definitely had its advantages, despite the tedious work it required. These differences, Tufekci claims, produce different "signals" to those in power. In a movement like the Montgomery boycotts, seeing thousands of protesters meant that there was a committed, powerful group that would not go away easily. Today, when a single tweet can draw a crowd, a protest means less.

Tufekci praises a "global anti-authoritarian protest culture," diverse yet connected, that allows "common sentiment and connections to develop between a deeply religious Muslim woman and the defiant occupiers in Zuccotti Park despite starkly different beliefs about religion, family, modesty, and other issues." But she seems to neglect a bigger question. What makes a protest "anti-authoritarian"? The feel-good nature of a big-tent political movement may well set up a movement's failure down the road by obscuring real differences.

So how deep can these affinities go? If the current state of our politics and culture is any indication, not deep enough. ■

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Samuel Moyn

A Belief without a Basis?

One Another's Equals
The Basis of Human Equality
Jeremy Waldron
Harvard University Press, $29.95, 264 pp.

After Charlottesville, it is clear once again that one the most fundamental American tenets—that all human beings are created equal—is nowhere near universally accepted. When white men on the march are nostalgic for a time when blacks and women were subordinate by nature, it rightly stokes our anger.

For the most implacable opponents of equality, differences in abilities or appearance or affiliation count for most. It seems doubtful that a philosophical argument that humans are equal will do the trick on its own. In fact, it has been strikingly hard to win over opponents of the proposition that all people are of equivalent worth in some morally pivotal sense. That doesn't mean the argument is not worth making. Yet as Jeremy Waldron ends up showing in his new book, it is not simple to establish it.

Waldron is one of the leading legal and philosophical thinkers at work today and one of the most lucid. That Waldron never shies away from complications is part of what makes his quarry so elusive and his new book hard going at times, in spite of Waldron's masterful guidance. Most of *One Another's Equals* is given over to establishing distinctions. Correctly framing the problem may not solve it. But Waldron supposes it could help.

An excellent reason to regard human beings as equal would be that God made them that way (assuming he did). And Christian readers will be especially interested to know that the chapters in this book were originally given as a set of the famous Gifford Lectures, which stretch back to the nineteenth century and require the lecturer to engage in "natural theology," as illustrious figures from William James to Reinhold Niebuhr to Josiah Royce have done before Waldron. Among Roman Catholics, Christopher Dawson, Etienne Gilson, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Charles Taylor have gone to Scotland to take their turn in the role. But Waldron reports that he does not want to make it easy on himself, by proclaiming some article of personal faith. Philosophers are also, as he testifies, "a little shy" about introducing religion into the discussion.

Given people's differences, Waldron starts by thinking about what it would take to conclude they are nevertheless all equal. He cites forgotten English thinker Hastings Rashdall for thinking otherwise. Rashdall, who himself received an invitation to give the Gifford lectures, lived when whites established a global color line, and believed in big disparities between whites and non-whites. For Rashdall, they were so pronounced that the inferior had to serve—and if necessary perish—to promote the interests of the superior. It is equally disturbing that, even when they have not been racists, most thinkers in Western history have believed that there were chasms of distinction among different kinds of human beings. Plato thought so, and Aristotle too. Only modern times made the contrary view more prevalent, even as new forms of belief in basic hierarchy, such as scientific racism, also become common.

Waldron starts by distinguishing two arguments he will have to win: one in favor of "continuous" equality and one in favor of "distinctive" equality. "Continuous" equality means that there are no differences important enough among humans to forbid our commitment to the basic equality of all. It does not necessarily follow from continuous equality that human beings have some "distinctive" or unique feature that sets them off from all other beings. But if such a feature existed, it would provide a less negative reason to grant all human beings equal status. It would also make it easier to grant that human equality is morally important. Slugs may all be continuous with each other, but I can still crush them under my boot. Humans may need to be not just equal but have equally high standing.

In a tour of philosophy across the centuries, Waldron considers many possibilities for what features of human beings might establish their continuity with one another and their distinctively high standing. Reason has long been a popular choice in the mix of argument. But Waldron also hastens to add—it is his main contribution—that we are looking for characteristics that come in a distinctively human range. I may have less capacity than you do to reason, or find it harder to engage my moral powers. But the point, Waldron says, is that our capacities differ across a common range that entitles us to view anyone in it as equal and to accord them high standing.

The importance of what he calls a "range property" grounding equality, Waldron contends, is that it allows us to reject the view that any trait that comes in various forms cannot do the work. For example, religious thinkers have claimed that only a "transcendent" feature that everyone has in precisely the same way—for example, if each was equally made in God's image—could serve to justify their equal standing. Waldron shows this is not so. It is enough that human capacities come within a given range to entitle people to regard themselves as one another's equals. (As Waldron goes on to acknowledge, this very argument makes it difficult to grant the equality of the profoundly disabled.)

Still, it matters a great deal that Waldron's book ultimately turns to the Gifford charge of engaging religion. His secular arguments for human equality are interesting but hardly suffice to convince the skeptics, from Plato to Friedrich Nietzsche, let alone America's "alt-right."

For this reason, one somewhat cynical way of reading Waldron's book—

Torch march of white nationalists in Charlottesville, Virginia

THE WASHINGTON POST / GETTY

even though he insists that religion is an optional extra for egalitarians—is that his true goal is to make it hard for the reader to see how she could sustain her belief in equality without faith. Some years ago, Waldron argued that early egalitarian John Locke, the English philosopher who influenced American founders to announce a new country based on human equality (at least for white males), relied indispensably on Christian premises. Waldron says he does not want to have to do so, and require faith to get the job done. But the fact that he makes the secular case for equality so difficult to make out almost inevitably points him in a religious direction. He goes so far as to suggest there are "possible grounds we might have for thinking that a religious foundation for basic human equality is necessary."

It is here that the secular may wish for a different approach. Early on, Waldron explains that he is looking for some fact about human beings that makes them equal, whether it is natural or God-given. He rejects the possibility that whether humans have enough continuity with one another and are special enough in their kindred capacities to deserve equal respect is primarily a *decision to make* rather than a *truth to endorse*. But put bluntly, morality is constructed in different ways over time and space. It is a scary thought, since if it is up to us to determine whether we want to see one another as equals, we could also choose to go the other way. But it just seems to be the case that universal human equality is a religious view in origin (not that many religious believers have lived out its implications). Secular modernity inherited that faith and indeed tried to make it a living political principle in a way that religious cultures have rarely done, in their tolerance of extraordinary hierarchies. As moralists in other traditions from Alexis de Tocqueville on have contended, basic equality is primarily a historical outcome, not a transhistorical fact.

That we must begin by acknowledging how rare it has been in human affairs for anyone to want a "basis for human equality" does not mean that equality is a mere fiction. That only we moderns have begun to act on it hardly implies it is time to give up. It may suggest, however, that we need less to abstract beyond our place and time for a permanent vision of the way human beings really are than to focus more on how modernity has made belief in human equality something that increasing numbers of people find meaningful. We can even resolve to fight harder for that equality without denying that our ancestors would have railed against it, or worrying that only God can guarantee our beliefs that all humans are both equal and equally special. ■

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RELIGION BOOKNOTES

Luke Timothy Johnson

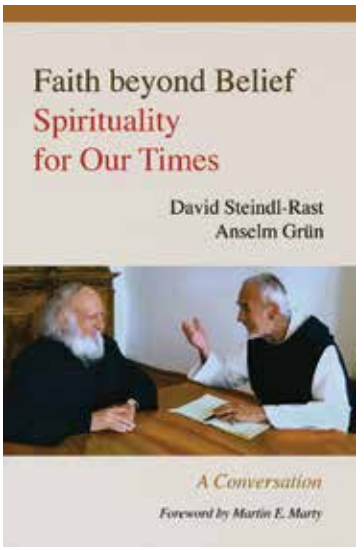
Looking back at my first six installments of Religion Booknotes, I discover that I have mostly paid attention to scholarly books. And I confess to a taste for the obscure: microhistories of nuns and recoveries of lost cities exercise a perhaps unhealthy attraction for me. But in the boxes of books the editors periodically send me—from which I choose some to review—there are always a number that are not so much about religion as they are expressions of religion.

A more precise description or designation is hard to find: works of spirituality? Of piety? Of instruction or correction? Of devotion? Of edification? Whatever the label, such books are less directed to the academy than to readers for whom religion matters existentially. It is possible, I realize, perhaps even probable that many readers of *Commonweal* would be better pleased at learning of a truly useful work of edification, than at hearing about another academic or ecclesial tempest in a teapot. Like more scholarly works, however, books that speak directly to believers about their faith also vary widely in worth. Trying hard to resist my natural inclinations, then, and to provide at least a modicum of balance, I devote this column to a handful of recent examples.

Faith beyond Belief
Spirituality for Our Times

David Steindl-Rast and Anselm Gruen
Liturgical Press, $17.95, 177 pp.

Two elderly Benedictine monks respond to a series of questions on the spiritual life put to them by the Austrian broadcaster Johannes Kaup. Both monks are already well known for their



books on spirituality. After a brief foreword by Martin Marty and a prologue by Kaup, the question-response format gives equal voice to both Gruen and Steindl-Rast; the book concludes with helpful notes providing information on the unexpectedly frequent allusions to ancient and modern authorities made by each of the participants.

Is this meant to be a continuation of the tradition established by the ancient *Sayings of the Fathers*, in which desert monks provided pithy advice for spiritual seekers? Is Kaup a twenty-first-century Palladius? Perhaps that was the idea behind a well-known journalist approaching monks who have a reputation as spiritual guides, seeking a "spirituality for our times." If so, the results are unimpressive.

The format itself is partly to blame: neither teacher is given room to develop his thought fully; creating the illusion of a casual conversation comes at the expense of coherence. And Kaup's questions do not help: they bounce from personal identity to political activism, from correcting pre–Second Vatican Council attitudes to the advocacy of his own positions—the respondents are overly defined by his leading, and not well-coordinated, questions. A few sample headings: "Ego, Fear, and Nothingness, or: the Epic Discovery of Self" and "Dead Man Rising, or: Jesus Christ and the Buddha" and "Sin and Evil, or: Why We Are Mired in Guilt."

The reader finds in these pages mostly a mish-mash of "spiritual" elements that mixes depth psychology, Nietzsche, Buddhism, and the "I'm OK, You're OK" optimism of self-help books, with only an occasional touch of what is distinctively Christian. The title *Faith beyond Belief* captures the viewpoint nicely: belief stands for the narrow confines of doctrine that separate humans, while faith represents the world-embracing openness to the mystery summoning all humans.

Missing entirely in this artificial conversation is an understanding of spirituality as engagement with the Holy Spirit of God and transformation into the image of Christ through the practices of asceticism and prayer taught by the saints. Apparently, "spirituality for our times" is mainly a matter of conceptual clarification and psychic self-grooming. This small book offers little to readers seeking something more than another collection of rapidly dating opinions.

Being Disciples
Essentials of Christian Life

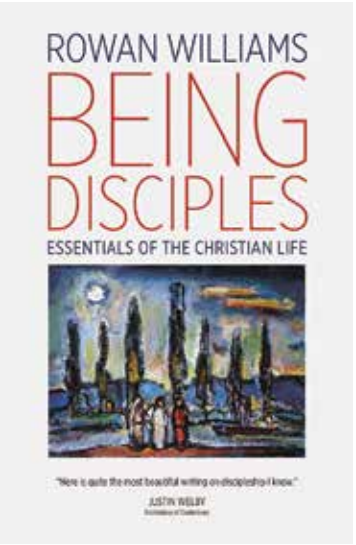
Rowan Williams
Eerdmans, $10, 96 pp.

In Rowan Williams's 2014 best-seller, *Being Christian*, the former archbishop of Canterbury laid out in straightforward fashion what he considered the four essential elements holding Christians together: Baptism, Eucharist, Bible, and Prayer. This companion volume follows the same format,

consisting of six short and accessible chapters originally delivered as oral presentations, followed by discussion questions. What distinguishes this set of reflections is its focus on the actual living out of Christian identity, that is, being (and becoming) disciples. Although the subjects treated are familiar enough (e.g., the theological virtues, forgiveness, holiness, life in the Spirit) each is given a fresh and appealing interpretation. The format and content alike make this book perfect for faith-sharing groups of whatever level of sophistication.

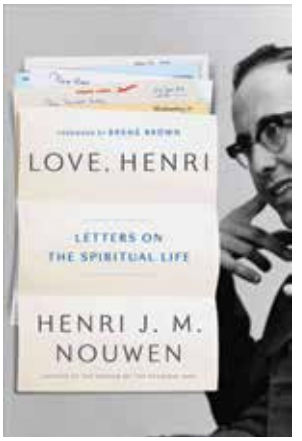
Williams meets reader expectations in matters of presentation. He writes with artful simplicity, his prose both beautiful and lucid. Writing for a "popular" audience while avoiding condescension is not easy, but Williams gifts his readers with language that provides no hint of the formidable learning that supports it. The same is true of his way of engaging Scripture or the writing of saints of the past: he moves easily in and around the New Testament without being hobbled by academic self-consciousness; and when he refers to Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross or Gregory of Nyssa, he uses them as fellow-examiners of a shared faith rather than as research projects.

Although Williams gets high points for style, the truly impressive thing about this small book is the way he lightly touches and illuminates difficult topics that are so often made more difficult by ponderous theologizing. In his discussion of holiness, he captures beautifully the critical distinction between saintly posturing and the following of Christ into the heart of human suffering; in his treatment of life in the Spirit, he categorically rejects "spirituality" as psychological self-nurture: "'Spirituality' for the Christian is shorthand for 'life in the Spirit,' for staying alive in Christ," and he deftly sketches the sort of prayer life that corresponds with this understanding. Most impressive is his treatment of "Faith in Society," which lays out what amounts to a Christian polity within secular society based on two theological convictions: "we are each of equal value to God," and "we are all dependent on each other." Stated in isolation, the two principles can appear simplistic, but Williams's way of reaching them is not. In a time of cultural and political confusion and division, in fact, Williams's words are both reassuring and challenging.



Henri J. M. Nouwen
Love, Henri: Letters on the Spiritual Life

Edited by Gabrielle Earnshaw
Convergent Books, $24, 345 pp.



This is the first of what promises to be a long stream of letters and other personal papers from the Nouwen estate. During his peripatetic life, Henri Nouwen was a prolific author, at his death having written thirty-nine books and hundreds of articles. Although he was almost constantly on the move, he was also constantly in communication with an ever-growing network of correspondents. He received some sixteen thousand letters, answered virtually all of them, and saved them! The present collection of two-hundred-plus letters, "on the spiritual life," is introduced, edited, and deftly annotated by Gabrielle Earnshaw, the curator of the Nouwen archives. The letters appear chronologically, beginning in 1973 when Nouwen was a professor at Yale Divinity School, and ending in 1996, shortly before his sudden death at sixty-four.

The letters confirm aspects of Nouwen's charismatic personality that most readers already knew or suspected: his restless search for a place that would at once make use of his distinctive gifts and at the same time offer him the personal and spiritual support he longed for; his discomfort with the disconnect between how others saw him (thus, the academic positions at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard) and his own sense of vocation (thus, his ultimate commitment to living with the little ones of *L'Arche*); his uncanny ability to start and then continue meaningful friendships in all the places his journey took him; his struggle with his own deep longing for intimacy that shadowed some of these same friendships; his willingness to display for the sake of others his vulnerability to hurt and rejection; his fidelity to his ministry as a priest and to the church.

What these letters provide is a sense of how Nouwen himself perceived all these dimensions as they were unfolding in real time. Regarding the shift from academia, he wrote in late 1985 to a former colleague at Notre Dame: "Now I am working with mentally handicapped people! Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard now seem like a long complex route to reach the poor in spirit. I do not regret any part of it. God has been very very good to me." Regarding his serious emotional breakdown in 1987, he writes to a young man suffering anxiety in August 1990: "You are right when you say that I have gone through a lot myself, but I also want you to know that God has given me an immense amount of joy in my life, and he wants to give you the same." Regarding troubles in the church, he comments on a book in March 1990: "I miss a spirit of joy and peace in the midst of all the conflicts that are really there, and I am quite overwhelmed by the heavy-handed generalizations with which they speak about the church and the life of the Spirit."

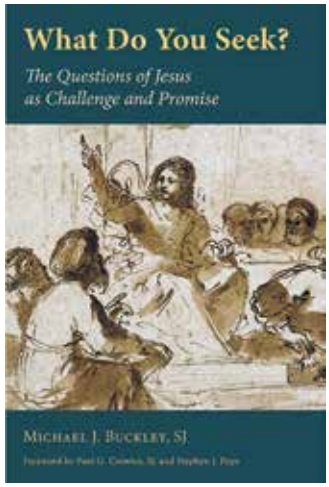
Perhaps most impressive is the way these letters reveal how direct, clear, and traditional Henri Nouwen was as a spiritual advisor. He does not pussyfoot around with psychological jargon. His training in clinical pastoral education is long past. If he speaks of emotional conditions, it is as one who knows firsthand what they are. But he does not identify the spiritual life with psychic tranquility. He knows it is identification with the suffering of Christ. He does not recommend ways to get better but the way of the cross. The letters are at once profoundly evangelical and steeped in the traditions of classical spirituality.

Writing to a Dutch woman in September 1995, for example, he recommends reading the daily gospel lection, "and simply look with your inner eye at what the story presents. Thus, Jesus can become your companion on your journey." He urges her to connect her suffering with that of Jesus, so that "you also connect your suffering with the suffering of the whole world. Because Jesus carries the pain of all humanity in his heart." As for his own prayer, "My own prayer life is quite simple. I simply look at Jesus, and say, 'Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me'…when you say that simple prayer often and from your heart, many graces will come to you."

The letters support, and in no way detract from, the conviction of many readers—as his many friends—that Henri Nouwen is at once a deeply human and profoundly reliable companion on the journey to God.

What Do you Seek?
The Questions of Jesus as Challenge and Response

Michael J. Buckley, SJ
Eerdmans, $18, 146 pp.



Fr. Buckley helps put to rest the canard that academic theologians cannot speak simply and powerfully out of their own faith and to the questioning faith of others. He is the Bea Professor of Theology Emeritus at Santa Clara University, and over a long academic career has produced a substantial body of scholarship, including *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (1987). The present set of reflections, though, is based on retreat conferences that he gave to religious men and women, and they retain some of the freshness and directness of oral delivery. Indeed, his prose rewards slow reading out loud.

In his introduction, Buckley acknowledges how theological language is always in danger of ossification: "Is there any way in which the language about God, about religious experience before God, language from the gospels themselves, can maintain its inherent vitality, can continue to convey life and human urgency?" He proposes that such vitalization of language can be found through engaging the questions posed by Jesus in the gospels, questions that "probe for meaning," that challenge thought and self-examination, that, like parables, "disturb the mind into active thought and recognition—or, more profoundly, into prayer and the consciousness and call of God." The remainder of the book, then, takes up fourteen questions posed by Jesus to his followers in the Gospel of John. Each question is taken as a challenge to self-examination.

Buckley cannot hide his wide learning completely. His literary references range from Aeschylus through Hopkins to Eliot. Among saints and mystics, he makes use of Ambrose, Augustine, and Thomas, as well as of Benedict, Ignatius, John of the Cross, and Thomas à Kempis. He has also done his homework on the Fourth Gospel, citing Bultmann and Brown and Schnackenburg in the appropriate places. But these authorities never replace his own voice; they assist rather than intrude. Theologically, these conferences manage to persuasively combine an emphasis on the importance of human experience with an even greater emphasis on God's sovereignty: God seeks us before we seek God. Likewise, Buckley links love of God and love of neighbor in a compelling way, combining what is best in traditional piety with what is best in a passion for social justice.

Another authority Buckley approvingly quotes is Karl Rahner, and this little book reminds me most of that earlier Jesuit's classic, *Encounters with Silence*. It does not have the same format of prayer, but it has the same virtue of distilled wisdom, showing that theology has everything to do with real life. ■

Luke Timothy Johnson is emeritus Woodruff Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University, and a frequent Commonweal *contributor. Among his many books are* Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity *(Yale) and* Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church *(Eerdmans).*

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Until All Are Welcome

Cristina L. H. Traina

In October a eucharistic minister at St. Nicholas Roman Catholic Church in Evanston, Illinois, crossed her arms over her chest to request a blessing rather than receive Communion. I was that minister, and my decision was a spur-of-the-moment response to the presence of a Lutheran pastor who had joined us in our very first commemoration of Reformation Sunday. If she could not receive the body and blood of Christ, neither would I.

The decision was spontaneous, but the thinking that led naturally to it was not. Since our marriage, my Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) pastor husband and I have been on a thirty-five-year ecumenical journey that has yielded great richness—religious life in stereo, we like to call it—and much hope.

Some of the hopeful moments have included the covenant struck between the Metropolitan Chicago Synod and the Archdiocese of Chicago in 1989 and renewed with great pomp on this past October 31, the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. Even more meaningful to us was the eighteen-month process of gathering with all the ELCA and Roman Catholic faith communities in Evanston to pray, discuss history and theology, bust myths, serve the community, partake in hymns and beer, and most importantly to create our own blueprint for ongoing collaboration, covenanted with the blessing of our bishops on Reformation Sunday.

Our ecumenical marriage has also contained many moments of pain. Some of them have come from the Lutheran side, as when my husband's candidacy committee threatened not to approve him for ordination because they believed a Catholic wife could not adequately support a Lutheran pastor in his congregational work.

But the overwhelming majority have come from the Catholic side, and the overwhelming majority of these have to do with the Eucharist. Quite simply, Catholic teaching forbids us to receive the Eucharist together. And this particular pain surprised my husband and me by intensifying, rather than abating, during the crescendo of ecumenical progress and hopefulness that led up to Reformation Day, 2017.

ELCA Lutherans and Catholics agree that the Eucharist is a sacrament. We agree that it is both a remembrance and memorial of Jesus's death and a moment of Christ's Real Presence in bread and wine. Although the documents of agreement have not yet been edited to reflect this, Pope Francis himself has made clear that the Eucharist is food for sinners, not a reward for spiritual perfection, another important point of convergence with Lutheran eucharistic theology. Catholics and Lutherans alike insist that only a validly ordained member of the clergy may celebrate the Eucharist.

The real disagreement is not over eucharistic theology but over that last point, valid ordination. As the USCCB and ELCA's joint *Declaration on the Way* laments, "an important asymmetry remains: Lutherans recognize the apostolic character of Roman Catholic ministry, but Catholics do not so recognize Lutheran ministry."

What this yields on the ground is an excruciating encounter of open hospitality on the Lutheran side with fundamental inhospitality on the Catholic side. Lutherans recognize the Catholic clergy as true celebrants of the sacrament, and they welcome Catholics to share in the sacrament in Lutheran churches. But in ordinary situations Catholics cannot recognize the legitimacy of Lutheran ordination or eucharistic celebration, must decline the Eucharist in Lutheran settings, and may not invite Lutherans to share in the Eucharist.

Pope Francis next to a statue of Martin Luther at an October audience for Catholics and Lutherans from Germany

CNS PHOTO / STEFANO RELLANDINI, REUTERS

This fact makes ecumenical relations at the personal and congregational level painful enough. But shoulder shrugging on the Catholic side, intended to express frustration and regret, only makes matters worse: "I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do, we're not allowed to inter-commune yet." Such a response may calm Catholic discomfort, but it does nothing to prevent the ongoing wounds Lutherans suffer whenever they come together with Catholics in ecumenical good will.

What can we do instead? *From Conflict to Communion*, the report by the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity, insists that Catholics too embrace the priesthood of all believers in Christ. What can we do with this? In the long term, Catholic clergy and theologians need to rededicate ourselves to aligning our convergent theology with our divergent ecclesiologies, working the kinks out of theology and practice. But in the short term, lay Catholics can impose a discipline of penance and regret on ourselves, in public lament of our own church's failure to work out ways of sharing a sacrament *on whose nature and meaning we agree*.

The decision to forgo Eucharist on Reformation Sunday was easy for me because I've already begun fasting publicly from it during our church's two seasons of penance and preparation. During Advent and Lent I attend Mass. I serve as a eucharistic minister. And I continue in my role as sacristan. But in solidarity with my Lutheran brothers and sisters in Christ, I do not receive the Eucharist.

Eucharistic theology and the priesthood of all believers are two of the most important agreements arising out of the past five decades of Lutheran-Catholic ecumenical dialogue. Your response to Eucharist and priesthood may take a different shape than mine. To be sure, one-by-one changes to the *sensus fidelium* won't produce instant results. But no major change at the top can be successful that isn't preceded by a significant, visible shift among the laity.

Be part of that shift: exercise your priesthood in support of a eucharistic table where all are welcome. ■

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