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CHRISTMAS CRITICS

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LETTERS

Better and worse nationalisms, fearing universal truths, etc.

WHOSE NATIONALISM?

I was impressed by the serious and worthy intentions of the open letter on "the new nationalism" in the October issue. I was also impressed by the lengthy list of signatories that includes many distinguished scholars and colleagues—an array of thoughtful theologians, some of whom I know personally and some through their writings. But there are two major points on which I need to register disagreement.

First, the letter lays down a pejorative definition of nationalism and fails to recognize a wider range of possibilities for our understanding of a very important notion in political thought and action. This negative approach is closely linked in the open letter with some very bad things, such as racism and xenophobia, as well as the neglect of the needs and rights of the stranger and the needy, and the denial of the full humanity of outsiders. The letter's indictment of nationalism overlooks the complexity and variety of this very important political phenomenon. One can point to many different forms of nationalism: Irish, African American, Serbian, Québécois, Biafran, South Sudanese, Yemeni, Cuban, Scottish. A fair evaluation depends on history and context. Perhaps the most morally relevant distinction that the authors of the letter might welcome is to argue that we should respond in very different ways to the nationalism of powerful majorities and the nationalism of oppressed minorities. The nationalism of the powerful is dominant and threatening and often dismissive of the needs and harms felt by minorities and neighbors. While it can gain wide popular support at home, it can also be very dangerous both to peace and to victims. The nationalism of the minority, on the other hand, can be a demand for autonomy, separation, or protection; it is often directed against imperialism (cf. Ireland, the early United States), but it is also likely to be an effort to preserve autonomy and local culture. There are also, of course, conflicts in which two forms of nationalism fight each other, for instance, as in Serbia and Croatia. Nationalism also goes through historic changes itself even in its home country. These changes can be morally significant, as the history of Zionism and Israel illustrates.

Second, nationalism remains an attractive idea in large parts of the world. While its supporters and followers have been involved in many bad things, a wholesale condemnation will not be helpful in many places undergoing profound transformation. Rejecting it altogether would be pastorally and politically unwise. It would also stand in the way of our understanding many popular movements. The notion is too valuable to be abandoned to the most short-sighted and self-regarding elements in contemporary American society.

John Langan, SJ
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GATHERING THE FRAGMENTS

It was a pleasure to read Kenneth Woodward's insightful interview with David Tracy ("In Praise of Fragments," October). Tracy's intellectual generosity is matched only by his catholicity of spirit.

Unless I am mistaken, Tracy's bent (more encompassing than a "fragment") is toward the "apophatic" tradition in theology. It is the governing perspective, embraced by thinkers like Dionysius the Areopagite and Meister Eckhart, who stress the dark incomprehensibility of God.

I readily acknowledge that my own tendency leans toward the "cataphatic" tradition that celebrates the determinate content of God's revelation in Christ.

Of course, Catholic theology must incorporate both sensibilities. For, even

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LETTERS

in—indeed, especially in—the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, God's mystery is not lessened, but heightened.

Hence, I found of particular interest Tracy's brief but rich remarks regarding Christology. He said: "For myself, Christ is the decisive way. And Jesus of Nazareth is the unsubstitutable person who is the Christ, and Jesus Christ is God and man." And, though he recognizes that other religions represent ways of salvation, he takes seriously the Christian tradition's "central understanding of the decisive, unsubstitutable role of Jesus Christ."

Grateful for what has been given, one nonetheless yearns for more. Do the world's religions merely coexist as incommensurate fragments? Or do they cohere around a Logos whose full revelation is both given and awaits fulfillment? Here, of course, I gesture toward my own understanding and orientation.

Perhaps some further indication will be forthcoming in "the big book" Tracy promises and we eagerly await. Given the contemporary "nihilism," "the sense of the absurdity and meaninglessness of life" that Tracy recognizes and laments, we desperately need a cogent and heart-bracing articulation of grace and presence.

For another tension, other than that between "apophatic" and "cataphatic," is constitutive of Catholic theology. It is the tension of "already" and "not yet." Perhaps we have been too long so paralyzed by fear of a "totalizing" presence that we have shied from proclaiming what is crucial for Catholic spirituality and theology: Eucharistic presence. For the Eucharist is the presence of Jesus Christ who is ever coming. In the Eucharist the Lord gathers up the fragments of our lives and our theologies, transfiguring both them and us.

Fr. Robert P. Imbelli
Bronx, N. Y.

HEROIC COURAGE

I thank *Commonweal* and Gregory Hillis for his article ("A Sign of Contradiction," October). It resonated with my own periods of disillusionment and frustration due to a lack of Christian charity within the church. My experience pales profoundly to the heroic Fr. Thompson's, whose entire life was a testament to unimaginable bravery as he chose to confront the people and institutions who professed membership in a church without integrating its most fundamental tenets.

How much might be accomplished with the issues of our day—immigration, respect for life, economic disparities, the environment, abuse scandals—if we, from pulpit to pew, exhibited a fraction of the courage that Fr. Thompson lived each day of his life.

Mary Ann Dorsett
Des Moines, Iowa

DESPISING DEMOCRACY

Had there been more space in his excellent article, ("Sturzo in Exile," October) Professor Faggioli might have drawn parallels with that other Catholic party, the Zentrumspartei (Central Party). In 1933 the party, led by Cardinal Secretary of State Eugenio Pacelli, voted for the act that gave Hitler his dictatorship, then voluntarily dissolved itself. Yet this was the party that in the previous century had combatted Bismark's Kulturkampf. Pacelli, as Secretary of State, was in the same mold as Cardinal Gasparri before him when it came to Catholic parties. As the (Catholic) German Chancellor Heinrich Brüning wrote: "The system of concordats led [Pacelli] and the Vatican to despise democracy and the parliamentary system.... Rigid governments, rigid centralization and rigid treaties were supposed to introduce an era of stable order, an era of peace and quiet." The Reichskonkordat, negotiated with Hitler by Pacelli over the heads of the German bishops and the Center Party's representatives, demoralized opposition to Hitler, scandalized German youth, and gave credit to Hitler in the eyes of the world. Incidentally, the Lateran Treaty with Mussolini was drafted, and partly negotiated, by Pacelli's brother Francisco.

John Cornwell
Jesus College, Cambridge
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Desperate Times

Five months after Hong Kong citizens first took to the streets to protest an extradition bill proposed by the government of mainland China, they show little sign of giving up. If anything, what began as a peaceful movement in support of civil liberties has transformed into a larger, sustained campaign against Chinese oppression. Accordingly, clashes between protestors and law enforcement have grown more frequent and more violent, as demonstrators try to defend themselves against tear gas, rubber bullets, and live rounds. Hundreds of activists trapped inside the Hong Kong Polytechnic University found themselves under siege by police using water cannons loaded with skin-burning chemicals. CNN's James Griffiths has observed that, in contrast to the optimism of the 2014 Umbrella Movement, this year's protests seem marked by desperation, the sense that this may be Hong Kong's last chance to freely chart its own future.

Judging from the wave of mass popular protests around the world in 2019, desperation seems to have set in among the people of many countries, including some that have not made international news. In Chile, a hike in public-transit fees sparked demonstrations that forced the government to cancel two major international summits. In Lebanon, a tax on internet calls through services like WhatsApp unleashed the largest anti-government protests in fifteen years. In Ecuador, the elimination of fuel subsidies spurred indigenous-led protests that forced the government to flee the capital city of Quito. In Sudan, women protesting a rise in the price of bread helped ignite a revolution that brought down the government of Omar al-Bashir. The list goes on: Albania, Algeria, Bolivia, Catalonia, Egypt, France, Gaza, Georgia, Haiti, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Montenegro, the Papua provinces of Indonesia, Puerto Rico, Pakistan, Peru, Romania, Russia, Uganda, and Zimbabwe have all seen sustained mass protests this year.

In one sense, this might be viewed as the continuation of a long-term pattern. Since World War II, the number of mass public protests around the world has grown every year. And for many years, these nonviolent, civil uprisings often met with success. Harvard political scientist Erica Chenowith estimates that twenty years ago, 70 percent of protest movements seeking systemic political change achieved their aims. But starting in the mid-2000s, that rate fell to 30 percent. Chenowith suggests that as governments have deployed new strategies for stifling dissent—from infiltrating protest movements and buying elite support to implementing surveillance technologies and intimidating journalists—they've been able to counter the effectiveness of nonviolent protest. And just as grassroot and activist movements share their methods and tactics internationally in solidarity with the like-minded, so have governments and law-enforcement authorities collaborated with one another across borders, thus strengthening their ability to quash popular unrest.

Still, 2019 seems unusual for the number and scale of protests, and for how long popular movements have been willing and able to sustain the fight. Some might search for a common political thread to explain this phenomenon—is this the coordinated left-leaning global revolution we've been waiting for?—but something much more elemental seems to be at work. It should be noted that many of the demonstrations around the world originated as protests against austerity policies and seemingly small-bore economic measures, like raising transit fees or imposing tariffs on texting. And this has been the case both in countries that are generally considered impoverished and in those where citizens are thought to be "doing well." Economists praise Chile as a success story of neoliberalism, but it is one of the most unequal of the world's industrialized countries. In the past decade, wages have risen and poverty has decreased, but most Chileans struggle with the cost of living. And in France, where yellow-vest protests are entering their second year, the income of the ultra-wealthy has for decades been rising at triple the rate of almost everyone else, especially those in rural areas.

What these and other examples suggest is that traditional indicators of economic health—low unemployment, high stock prices, solid GDP—fail to reflect the impact of stagnant wages and the yawning gap between rich and poor. Consider, in fact, the United States, where income inequality is now at a fifty-year high, and where economic policy is tailored to benefit corporations and the wealthy. For too many Americans, the "healthy economy" actually exerts a painful toll. We might draw inspiration from the actions of millions of ordinary people around the world to bring focused and sustained attention to the reality here at home.

Rubio Goes Rogue

The Republican Party has, for the most part, worshipped contentedly in the church of free-market fundamentalism for the past four decades. Guided by its pro-business, anti-government doctrines, Republicans have crippled unions, undercut workers' rights, and pushed tax cuts that benefit the wealthiest Americans. But every few years an enterprising conservative politician recognizes that extreme inequality and stagnant wages might be testing voters' faith in such policies—and proposes a supposedly more compassionate alternative. A few years ago Paul Ryan launched a campaign described by the *Atlantic* as a "much-ballyhooed push to get his party talking about poverty." Now another Republican, Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, is appealing to Catholic teaching to advocate for what he calls "common-good capitalism."

Rubio laid out his new economic vision in a November 5 speech at the Catholic University of America's business school in Washington, D.C. He began by citing Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical, *Rerum novarum*, which was written to address the intense debates over workers' rights that followed the industrial revolution. "I wanted to revisit what he wrote because we are once again in the midst of transformative and disruptive economic change, and we once again face rising calls for socialism," Rubio said.

He insists that he understands the anger and fear of struggling Americans. Using language that might draw cheers at a Bernie Sanders rally, Rubio talked about "a system that has been rigged" against young people burdened by student debt and railed against "the people who brazenly adopted the motto 'greed is good' in the 1980s, but then caused a catastrophic financial crisis." Rubio noted that while corporate profits have soared over the past forty years, "investment of those profits back into the companies' workers" has dramatically declined. "This is what it looks like when, as Pope Francis warned, 'finance overwhelms the real economy,'" he said.

Rubio deserves credit for criticizing a profit-only corporate mentality and acknowledging that markets alone aren't enough to provide for the common good. But he failed to mention unions or a living wage even once—scandalous omissions in a speech claiming to take a Catholic approach to the dignity of work. This is consistent with Rubio's legislative record of opposing increases to the minimum wage, supporting so-called "right-to-work" laws, and voting for tax cuts that benefit corporations and the rich.

Rubio's arguments, which were long on moral exhortation but short on concrete measures to help workers, drew praise from some quarters of the right. At *First Things*, Emile Doak gushed that Rubio's framework was "a more authentically Christian approach to political economy than anything either major party has put forth in recent memory." Still, much of the speech was emblematic of the way conservatives who pretend to be addressing the new populist discontent just end up repeating familiar right-wing tropes. A "government that guarantees you a basic income is also one that controls where you work and how much you make," Rubio declared without evidence or explanation. He warned that America was in danger of being destroyed by socialism, a clear reference to the Democratic presidential primary. Rubio made no distinction between authoritarian and democratic versions of socialism, nor did he mention that Benedict XVI—then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger—once said that "democratic socialism was and is close to Catholic social doctrine and has in any case made a remarkable contribution to the formation of a social consciousness."

Rubio should be commended for challenging the dogmas of his party, at least rhetorically, but his highly selective reading of Catholic social teaching keeps him from considering anything more radical than tax credits and sermons against greed. That won't be nearly enough to solve the problem his speech describes.

—*John Gehring*

One Every Day

The El Paso Walmart where a gunman targeting Mexicans killed twenty-two people last summer reopened for business on the second Thursday of November. That same morning, there was a mass shooting at a high school in Santa Clarita, California; two students died, as did the sixteen-year-old gunman, who shot himself. This came a day after the U.S. Justice Department had issued recommendations—but no new regulatory proposals—for stemming gun violence. The plan, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, "underscores the absence of a comprehensive White House proposal" for addressing the problem. FBI statistics as of mid-November showed that the average number of people killed yearly in mass shootings has risen to sixty-seven in the decade since 2010; that's up from twenty-four in the first decade of the 2000s, from twenty-one in the 1990s, from fifteen in the '80s, and from eight in the '70s. On November 16, five people were killed in a murder-suicide in San Diego; the next day, four people were shot to death at a backyard party in Fresno. According to the Gun Violence Archive, these last incidents brought the number of mass shootings in the United States to 370 so far this year. That means that 2019 will end with an average of more than one mass shooting per day.

California has some of the toughest gun laws in the country, but as elsewhere they can be easily circumvented. The assault rifle used in the mass shooting at last summer's Gilroy Garlic Festival, for example, was purchased legally in neighboring Nevada. State and federal authorities are investigating the possibility that the Santa Clarita shooter assembled his weapon from separate parts ordered legally through the mail. *If only existing laws were sufficiently enforced*, say policymakers opposed to stricter regulations, *then there would be fewer mass shootings.* The National Rifle Association takes the same line. The concern might ring true were it not for the ongoing campaign to water down or dismantle existing laws. There was hope among advocates of sensible gun policy that infighting and financial malfeasance at the NRA earlier this year were signs of its imminent downfall. But the organization righted itself when duty called, successfully scuttling a slate of gun measures put forth by the Justice Department following the shootings in El Paso and Dayton, Ohio, which occurred within less than twenty-four hours of each other last August.

If there was some good news to be had on guns, it came on November 12. The U.S. Supreme Court announced it would not hear an appeal by Remington Arms—the maker of the rifle used in the 2012 Sandy Hook shootings—over a lawsuit brought against the company in Connecticut state court by relatives of the victims. The decision clears the way to challenging a 2005 federal law that shields gun manufacturers, distributors, and dealers from liability in gun-related crimes. That law was the culmination of an intense seven-year lobbying effort by the NRA. Wayne LaPierre hailed it as the gun industry's biggest legislative win in twenty years. Many others have rightly characterized it as a sweetheart deal extending protections to gunmakers that few other industries enjoy. In its prehearing filings to the Supreme Court, Remington warned that the families' lawsuit, if successful, would "eviscerate" the 2005 federal law. Let it be so, let it be soon, and let it be just the start.

—Dominic Preziosi

Preeminent?

Two stories of political significance emerged from the annual meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops last month. The first was the election of the USCCB's first Latino president, Archbishop José H. Gómez of Los Angeles—an immigrant to the United States from Monterrey, Mexico.

Gómez is often described as a pastorally minded conservative, but he's also a forceful advocate for immigration reform. At his first press conference as president-elect of the USCCB, he spoke out about the Supreme Court debate on the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, urging that a way be found to let Dreamers stay in the United States. That shouldn't have been a surprise. Two days after Donald Trump won the presidency, Gómez held an interfaith gathering at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels to express solidarity with all those who now feared deportation and demonization. "Tonight we promise our brothers and sisters who are undocumented, we will never leave you alone," he said.

But if Gómez's election gave him a "megaphone," as Thomas Reese, SJ, put it, to speak out about cruel and inhumane immigration policies, the bishops left no doubt that abortion remains their top concern. The language they approved for a letter that will supplement their quadrennial statement about elections, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, states this unequivocally: "The threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority because it directly attacks life itself, because it takes place within the sanctuary of the family, and because of the number of lives destroyed." It's an interesting statement. By those criteria, it's not clear why the climate crisis isn't just as urgent—a habitable planet is a precondition for "life itself," and in the decades ahead the "number of lives destroyed" by flood, famine, and fire could be catastrophically high.

It's true that the bishops later cite Pope Francis's *Gaudete et exsultate*, noting that "equally sacred" are "the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery, and every form of rejection." But the bishops voted down Cardinal Blase Cupich's suggestion to include the rest of that paragraph from the encyclical, which warns against those who say that "the only thing that counts is one particular ethical issue or cause" and concludes: "We cannot uphold an ideal of holiness that would ignore injustice in a world where some revel, spend with abandon and live only for the latest consumer goods, even as others look on from afar, living their entire lives in abject poverty." The bishops lamely protested that there wasn't enough space for such additions.

What seems more likely is that the insertion of "preeminent" and the rejection of Cupich's amendment indicate the bishops' obstinate resistance to Francis's approach to politics, one less reliably sympathetic to the Republican Party and the priorities of American conservatives. Archbishop Alexander Sample of Portland, Oregon, basically admitted as much: "We are at a unique moment with the upcoming election cycle to make a real challenge to *Roe v. Wade*, given the possible changes to the Supreme Court." Sample might as well have cut an ad for Trump. By pointing to one issue as "preeminent," the bishops, as Francis might put it, are replacing consciences more than forming them. Catholics are not called to be single-issue voters but to serve the common good in all its complexity. So page through *Faithful Citizenship* if you must, but then turn to *Laudato si'*, *Evangelii gaudium*, *Gaudete et exsultate*, or Francis's homilies—or simply read the gospels and pray about what this political moment truly demands of you.

—Matthew Sitman

MARGARET O'BRIEN STEINFELS

Rereading Havel

The Velvet Revolution at thirty

November 26 is the thirtieth anniversary of the Velvet Revolution, the peaceful demise of Soviet control over Czechoslovakia. A hundred thousand Czechs and Slovaks gathered in Prague's Wenceslas Square jangling their keys to celebrate the fall of the Communist government and the promise of a new life. On that remarkable day, Václav Havel and Alexander Dubček, among others, stood on the balcony overlooking the square. Two decades earlier, on April 4, 1968, I was in Prague, traveling with a group of French Catholic students on an Easter trip to Central Europe. Dubček had just been installed at the head of a new government that was trying to shake off the Soviets. The weather, as I recall, was damp and gray, but the Prague Spring mood was ebullient.

That was one of the unforgettable days I associate with the Velvet Revolution. Another was the following August 20. I was traveling on an overnight train from Germany to Paris with my husband and daughter, when we got word that Warsaw Pact troops had invaded Czechoslovakia to quash Dubček's reforms. When we reached Paris, no amount of sleep deprivation could tear us away from the radio and reports of Czech resistance. The invasion was of course followed by the persecution, arrest, and imprisonment of Czechoslovak dissenters, the young Havel among them.

My colleagues at *Commonweal* used to tease me about my enthusiasm for Havel's writing. During the 1970s and '80s, *Commonweal* was more attuned to dissidents in Poland—Lech Wałęsa, Adam Michnik, and, of course, the new Polish pope. Easy choice: a Czech playwright hardly matched the drama of a rebellion wrapped in a Catholic cloak.

Czechoslovakia was another story, culturally and religiously. So was Václav Havel, whose plays and essays were addressed to a more secular society steeped in the humanism of Tomáš Masaryk and the rebelliousness (as I liked to imagine) of Jan Hus, the fifteenth-century heretic. My enthusiasm included reading, and frequently quoting from, Havel's writings: *Letters to Olga*, "The Power of the Powerless," "Politics and Conscience," "The Anatomy of a Reticence." When British supporters of repressed Czech and Slovak dissidents wished to drum up similar support in the United States, our Manhattan living room became the site of a small group of organizers, including the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor.

In 1989, when the beleaguered Czechs finally brought down the Communist government, they were emancipating themselves from "living a lie." That is how Havel characterized the corruption of language, thought, and morals that this "post-totalitarian system" required. The system "mount[ed] a total assault on humans, [who] stand against it alone, abandoned and isolated." Thus, dissent and dissident movements, he wrote, "are naturally" and "explicitly defensive movements, [which] exist to defend human beings and the aims of life against the aims of the system." He offered the example of a greengrocer who every day hangs up a sign in his window: "Workers of the World Unite." The greengrocer "never thinks about the slogans…nor do they… express his real opinions." This "automatism" and the demands of the system are shattered the day the greengrocer decides *not* to hang up the sign, nor to vote, nor to attend meetings required by the "system." With that, he becomes a dissident: "his revolt is an attempt *to live within the truth*"—Havel's resonant contrast to "living a lie."

Thirty years later, all of this is history. The Czech Republic and its neighbors in Central and Eastern Europe have become "normal" countries, members of the European Union. Most are democracies operating at half-tilt under the control of oligarchs who grabbed up what was left of their country's failed socialist economies. Things have not turned out as everyone, myself included, hoped and expected.

My colleagues may have been right to mock (gently, of course) my enthusiasm for Havel's readable metaphysics and absorbing moral inquiry. His down-to-earth examples and fine-tuned reflections on how to think about, and to live honorably within and beyond, the ideological strictures of Soviet control inspired the Velvet Revolution, and many readers elsewhere. Yet those fine words and stirring phrases did not lay out a map for the future. Havel was elected president in June 1990 and served for thirteen years. He was far more popular in the West than in the Czech Republic. His puckish take on life did not mesh with normal politics, and he never gave up being a dissident, even within his own government.

Rereading Havel now, I hear the echo of a beleaguered people. It may be a stretch, but I can't help wondering whether we are the ones now caught up in "living a lie"? It isn't only the abuse of constitutional norms, erratic policy-making, demeaning personal attacks, and vanity. It is the fog of nonsense that enmeshes all of us—conservatives, liberals, progressives, right-wingers, Trumpers and never-Trumpers. It is the moral miasma caused by the antics of a crazed president and a media fixated on his every word and gesture.

Who will be our greengrocers? When will those who have so far silently tolerated this preposterousness—Republican officials and notables, corporate leaders, former White House enablers, "acting" heads of agencies, *Wall Street Journal* editorialists, donors, heartland fence-sitters—suddenly decide to say "Enough!" and stop living a lie?

CATHLEEN KAVENY

Bridge Burners

What the culture warriors get wrong

In October, a South Carolina priest refused to give Communion to Democratic presidential candidate Joseph Biden because he supports legalized abortion. Then at their November meeting, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops voted to label abortion the "preeminent" moral issue in their "Faithful Citizenship" guide to voting, ignoring the eloquent objections to that language from bishops appointed by Pope Francis. These events prompted several observers to wonder: Are the culture wars back?

Before answering this question, we need to answer a prior one: What exactly is a "culture warrior"?

In my view, the label does not point to a particular person, or a particular cause, but rather to a particular rhetorical style. The people we call "culture warriors" consistently position themselves as moral prosecutors. Echoing the fiery language of Hosea and Jeremiah, they call out political and moral opponents, whom they put on trial for violating the fundamental moral law. Like actual prosecutors, they don't want to hear excuses or counterarguments. They want the targets of their denunciation to plead guilty, do their time, and amend their ways. They are full of anger, which they stoke rather than control, because they believe their anger is righteous.

We find culture warriors across the political and religious spectrum. The preeminent Catholic conservative culture warrior, of course, is the Archbishop of Philadelphia, Charles Chaput, OFM. He has relentlessly castigated not only pro-choice politicians, but also ordinary Catholics who judge it best to vote for pro-choice politicians on other grounds—such as their support for universal health care or desire to strengthen unions. But Chaput's rhetorical style is not foreign to those on the left. Think of teenage climate-change activist Greta Thunberg, who angrily indicted world leaders at the 2019 U.N. climate-action summit: "We are in the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth—how dare you!"

It's not the issue that makes a culture warrior, it's the rhetoric. In fact, there are a growing number of Catholic "whole Catechism" culture warriors. Because they defend both the unborn and the refugee, and condemn both euthanasia and climate change, they see themselves as a bridge between left and right. But their use of prophetic indictment means they are more likely to be an isolated island of righteousness, congratulating themselves for their commitment to the full spectrum of Catholic moral teaching. For everyone else, the bridge they build is booby-trapped.

Real bridge-building requires a fundamental shift in rhetorical approach, not merely talking about a broader range of moral issues. Rather than demanding conformity, a dialogical approach facilitates mutual exchange, nurturing the possibility of good-faith discussion in three ways. First, it pinpoints and contextualizes differences. A person who honestly does not think that human activity is causing climate change may be wrong about the facts. But that does not mean she is a monster simply unconcerned about the fate of the planet. Second, it recognizes that different people may prioritize different mediating principles. Not everyone who opposes a generous immigration policy opposes welcoming the stranger; some may prioritize taking care of the poor and vulnerable already in our midst. Third, it appreciates the complexities of role-related obligations in a pluralistic society. A psychiatrist or a priest who does not inform a patient's husband about her scheduled abortion is honoring a professional duty of confidentiality—he is not a pro-abortion stooge. And a lawmaker like Biden—one with deep moral reservations about abortion—may nevertheless judge that advocating a law criminalizing the procedure is inconsistent with his obligations as a public servant in a highly divided society.

We can argue about facts, we can argue about priorities, and we can argue about the nature and scope of role-related obligations. And that's the point. A dialogical approach facilitates and channels argument. In contrast, a culture-war approach shuts it down. As I argued in my 2016 book *Prophecy without Contempt*, people tend to resent others who try to dominate them by assuming the role of moral prosecutor. They don't like being denounced as minions of the culture of death. As Francis X. Meier recently wrote in *First Things*, "Contempt for people who offer their questions and criticisms out of principle, even if they're mistaken or needlessly harsh, has the opposite of the desired effect. It stiffens resistance and proves the need for more of it. Name-calling is a bad way of winning over the alienated."

Of course, it's always easier to dish out contempt than to take it. Meier's basic point is much easier to appreciate if one has been the target of scorn. I can't help wondering: What would have happened if Meier had learned those lessons twenty years ago? As Archbishop Chaput's close advisor and speechwriter, he might have been able to help us avoid some of the bitterness and alienation that plague American Catholicism—bitterness and alienation that have been provoked in no small part by his own rhetorical choices and those of his boss.

RITA FERRONE

A Hermeneutic of Suspicion

L'affaire Pachamama

The Amazon Synod was remarkable for so many good things. Pope Francis showed genuine respect to the indigenous people of the Amazon, the bishops addressed the pastoral needs of the region with breakthrough recommendations to ordain married men and formally recognize the ministry of women, and participants raised up ecological degradation and predatory practices toward both the earth and the poor as urgent challenges of our time. It's a shame that what many will remember from this synod instead is a two-foot-high wooden statue of a pregnant woman, which became the focus of ire, misunderstanding, fear, public controversy, and ultimately vandalism.

The small statue I am speaking of is, of course, the folk-art depiction of a pregnant woman that was placed on display, first at a tree-planting ceremony organized by Franciscans and later in a Roman church. At the tree planting a number of items representing life in the Amazon were arranged in a central position on the lawn of the Vatican gardens, with the assembly gathered around them in a circle: a canoe; a cloth covered with images of a river and plants; representations of birds and fish; a net; and several human figures, including martyrs to the faith and two pregnant native women, kneeling, in an introspective pose, with a child visible in the womb of each one. During the ceremony, an Amazonian woman picked up one of these folk-art pieces and presented it to Pope Francis, who blessed it. She called it "Our Lady of the Amazon" as she presented it to him (a video of the event shows this clearly, although not all of her words are audible). Some speculated that the two pregnant women together represented the Visitation, although this was never stated.

No one in the delegation who set up the display, nor those in the organizing committee of the synod who had experience in the region, seemed at all ruffled by the presence of the images of the pregnant women. Pope Francis, who has a great respect for popular piety, was the least disturbed of all. He received the woman kindly, and gave his blessing to the image. When asked about the provenance of the figure, Fr. Fernando Lopez, SJ, an itinerant preacher who travels to the remote regions of the Amazon with a missionary group, said they had been using this image for years. They bought it in an artisan's market in Brazil.

He explained that it represents life—an explanation similar to those offered by Paolo Ruffini of the Vatican Dicastery of Communications, and by Bishop David Guinea, a missionary bishop in Peru, who pointed out that he had seen this image on other occasions. "We all have different interpretations: the Virgin Mary, Mother Earth…women, fertility, life; Amazonia is meant to be full of life," he said. The bishop's answer, although hardly satisfying to those who wished to pin down the meaning to *one thing*, offered a good example of how multivalent symbols work. The cross, to take a classic example, embraces both suffering and glory, redemption and solidarity—it is never *just one thing*. Fr. Lopez was also comfortable making reference to the allusive qualities of the image of the pregnant woman: "We were all born from a mother, and we all have a mother who was pregnant and delivered us to life…. It's a mystery, life itself, that signifies in a way that God is also mother, he's engendered us and cares for life." All of these interpretations are, strictly speaking, Christian.

Afterwards the display was transferred to the Carmelite church of St. Mary Transpontina, down the street from St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. These figures and objects were intended to rest there as a sign of the living realities and theological perspectives that are part of the Amazonian region, realities that the synod wished to engage through their work and deliberations. The idea—familiar to anyone who has ever prepared a prayer corner or a focus table for a religious gathering—was that these tangible objects would bring to mind the spiritual realities we naturally associate with them, such as the sacredness of life, the beauty and fragility of the rainforest, the blessing of work, the necessity of witness, and so on, and so inspire people to pray for the synod. At least, that was what was supposed to happen.

What actually happened was a good deal less edifying. A flurry of outrage, prompted by the false idea that the statues and the ceremony itself were idolatrous, broke out in the right-wing press and across social media. Every explanation offered for the presence and meaning of the statuettes was subjected to a hermeneutic of suspicion, and the more reasonable interpretations were discarded in favor of the most damning ones. Self-appointed guardians of orthodoxy, whipped into a frenzy of zealotry by the speculation that the figure actually represented Pachamama, an Andean female deity, stole the art-

A wooden statue of a pregnant woman in the Church of St. Mary in Traspontina, displayed during the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon in Rome, October 18, 2019

CNS PHOTO / PAUL HARING

works from the church and threw them into the Tiber.

Although the actual act of vandalism may have been spontaneous, the breakdown of understanding and civility that preceded it was the fruit of organized efforts to sabotage the synod. Indeed, charges of idolatry were being made before the synod began or anyone had seen the statue. Concerns about the "dangers" of inculturation, and dark warnings about the supposedly pagan nature of ecological themes in Pope Francis's teachings, were already in the air.

To give a couple of examples: In June, the retired German Cardinal Walter Brandmüller published a public condemnation of the synod through journalist Sandro Magister's blog. This broadside against the synod was released simultaneously in five different languages. Brandmüller deemed the working document "heretical" for its references to "Mother Earth," which he decried as expressions of a "pantheistic idolatry of nature." He was soon seconded by American Cardinal Raymond Burke, with whom he had coauthored the famous "dubia" in 2016, challenging Francis on the orthodoxy of his exhortation *Amoris laetitia.*

Journalist Christopher White, writing in *Crux* in September, also profiled a group called the "Pan-Amazon Synod Watch." This "hub of resistance" was sponsored by the Plinio Corrêa de Oliveira Institute (IPCO) and the Societies for the Defense of Tradition, Family and Property (TFP), a traditionalist right-wing Brazilian organization devoted to capitalism. Oliveira, who died in 1995, was himself a traditionalist and strongly opposed to Vatican II. He was also particularly disdainful of indigenous peoples, whom he considered crypto-pagans. Their communitarian impulses, in Oliveira's view, constitute a threat to civilization, which is bound up with private property. The TFP hosted a conference in Rome at the time of the synod, where they showcased their critique of everything they associated with it, from climate science to liberation theology. Cardinal Burke attended, and Cardinal Brandmüller closed the conference.

LifeSiteNews also attended this conference and interviewed a tribal leader, Jonas Marcolino Macuxi, who spoke at it. Macuxi is an Evangelical Protestant. According to the article, he said the ritual on the Vatican lawn looked "decidedly 'pagan.'" But Pedro Gabriel, a Portuguese doctor who has written extensively and carefully about the controversy at the website "Where Peter Is," noted that if you actually listen to the video, you can see that Macuxi never used the word pagan. He says that the use of smoke for purification is primitive, and "we don't do that." But one is left to wonder if he might have said the same thing about liturgical uses of incense or about praying before statues of the saints—Catholic practices that many Evangelicals regard as improper. This is but one example of how an eagerness to tar the synod and Pope Francis with charges of syncretism and heresy ran ahead of the facts.

As the synod wore on, critics of the pope continued to fan the flames of anxiety and alarm—some even going so far as to compare the presence of the female figures to "the abomination of desolation" spoken of in Scripture, or to call their introduction into a church "a grave sin, a crime against the divine law" (this last from Cardinal Gerhard Müller, former head of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, who ought to know better). Some who viewed the video of the tree-planting ceremony spied what they thought was a phallic symbol in the display, and their panic deepened. They later were forced to admit that what they saw was merely the upraised arm of another statuette, lying on the ground, representing one of the martyrs of the Amazon. Scandal and outrage were easily aroused by, well, reading into things stuff that wasn't there.

It is worth noting that there was nothing particularly Pachamama-like about the statues that were thrown into the Tiber, except that they were women. (Pope Francis called them "statues of the *pachamama*" when he announced that the police had recovered them from the river, but his use of this name was only because the Italian media had used it, according to Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni.) You can look online for images of Pachamama and there are dozens. The Andean goddess's name has been emblazoned on all kinds of things, including tours, ecological institutes, music groups, artworks, face creams, and more. There are plenty of images of Pachamama, and some show her pregnant, but not one of them looks like the statuette from the Vatican ceremony, whose outstanding qualities are (a) her humility, and (b) the child within her womb, who is visible and depicted with care as an individual. More typically, Pachamama is shown with an effusion of fruit and flowers around her, proud of her fertility, which is abundant; the child in her womb is not so important because, after all, she is a nature goddess and the fecundity of nature is wider than that.

It therefore seems clear to me that whether or not one could dig up a layer of indigenous nature-religion underlying the images that were brought into the Vatican and later vandalized, the image as it stands possesses genuine Christian qualities—specifically humility, dignity, and respect for both women and unborn children. These qualities may have drawn Christian believers to it in the first place, when they saw and purchased it in a market in Brazil. It is good that the pope received it respectfully and blessed it. It belongs within the church, as a gift of the Amazonian people to the rich and varied patrimony of Catholicism.

Pope Saint Paul VI, in his landmark exhortation on evangelization in 1975, wrote that "The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself" (no. 15). He also wrote, with great respect, that non-Christian and pre-Christian religions "are all impregnated with innumerable 'seeds of the Word' and can constitute a true 'preparation for the Gospel'" (no. 53). There it is again—the symbol of pregnancy—this time used to describe the church in its work of evangelization. Perhaps rather than the image of the pregnant woman suggesting nature-worship, it ought to suggest to us that the Amazonian people are bringing to fruition the "seeds of the Word" that they have received. Perhaps if we could accept it in the right spirit, we might even be a little more evangelized ourselves.

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PAUL BAUMANN

William Barr, Catholic Moralist

The U.S. attorney general reduces the Gospel to a 'micro-morality'—one that doesn't apply to his boss.

U.S. Attorney General William Barr

CNS PHOTO / YURI GRIPAS, REUTERS

I finally got around to reading Attorney General William Barr's Notre Dame speech concerning the threats now endangering religious freedom and marginalizing religious believers. I share Barr's worries about the political and legal pressures being applied to religious organizations that profess traditional views about sexual morality, marriage, homosexuality, and transgenderism. The insistence of former presidential candidate Beto O'Rourke that such groups be denied tax-exempt status is not only politically tone-deaf; it is also deeply illiberal. Democrats should reject such demagoguery. Freedom of religion or conscience means little if it does not protect the rights of those whose views we judge to be wrong. On this fraught issue, live-and-let-live should be the path forward. Better judgments on the value of the new sexual dispensation can be made in a generation or two. In a democracy, the sincere beliefs of people on both sides of such a complicated issue, especially one that implicates how families raise their children, deserve respect and tolerance.

But the bulk of Barr's speech was a snide version of conservative Catholic boilerplate, designed not to persuade anyone but to flatter true believers and incite the troops. Barr claimed that "Christianity teaches a micro-morality. We transform the world by focusing on our own personal morality and transformation." But this "micro-morality" has more to do with Republican Party orthodoxy than with the Gospel. So much for the long record of the church's support for labor unions and a robust role for government in caring for the poor and promoting civic virtue. So much for Catholic social teaching, period. Barr seems to believe the church can tell you what is moral in the bedroom, but not in the workplace or the marketplace. Of course, it's possible to be a Catholic and disagree with the church's social teaching. But ignoring that teaching, as Barr did in his speech, is another matter.

Barr, a very rich man, contrasts his micro-morality to the actions of those misbegotten souls who "find salvation on the picket line" and "signal" their "finely tuned moral sensibilities by demonstrating for this cause or that." He describes a recent experience in church, but smugly reassures his audience it did not occur in *his* parish. At the end of Mass, an announcement was made by the chairman of the Social Justice Committee about homelessness in Washington, D.C. The chairman reported on visits to the D.C. government to lobby for "higher taxes and more spending to fund mobile soup kitchens." Barr suggests that this sort of political activity is virtually un-Christian. The orthodox Catholic solution, he argues, would have been to call for volunteers to staff the soup kitchens. Of course, volunteerism and individual responsibility for helping the poor do not negate the need for government action to address a problem as immediate, daunting, and complicated as homelessness. Barr disagrees. "The solution to the breakdown of the family is for the State to set itself up as the ersatz husband for single mothers and the ersatz father to their children," he writes, caricaturing the views of those who advocate for government action. "Today—in the face of all the increasing pathologies—instead of addressing the underlying cause, we have the State in the role of Alleviator of Bad Consequences. We call on the State to mitigate the social costs of personal misconduct and irresponsibility.... The call comes for more and more social programs to deal with the wreckage. While we think we are solving problems we are underwriting them."

Barr paints a very dark picture of the moral "chaos," much of it sexual, now sweeping across American society as religious morality is discarded for "licentiousness" and secular godlessness. If his speech is any indication, he sees no connection between societal disarray and economic inequality. No connection between the consumerist mentality that pervades society and fuels the economy and the inability of people to "put chains on their appetites." No connection between the vaunted individualism of Americans and our abiding social animosities. Neither does Barr mention Jesus' rather dark view of the moral corruption wealth causes. The eye of the needle is wide in Barr's version of Catholicism. Trump Tower might even squeeze through it.

Coming from someone eager to advance the agenda of a president who is a model of licentiousness and moral chaos—a president who claims he has never asked God for forgiveness—Barr's moral preening is almost surreal. But perhaps it is not surprising. Barr's understanding of Christianity is essentially Pelagian; nowhere does his notion of "Judeo-Christian" morality reflect the paradoxical and decidedly "macro" teachings of Jesus. "Modern secularists dismiss this idea of morality as otherworldly superstition imposed by a kill-joy clergy. In fact, Judeo-Christian moral standards are the ultimate utilitarian rules for human conduct," Barr argues. "Religion helps teach, train, and habituate people to want what is good.... In other words, religion helps frame moral culture within society that instills and reinforces moral discipline." Describing the morality of Jesus as essentially utilitarian and this-worldly is like championing Trump as an avatar of democracy.

I had been to Mass the day I read Barr's diatribe. The readings that day were piquant. In the Responsorial Psalm we were reminded that "the Lord hears the cry of the poor." The first reading was from Sirach: "The Lord is a God of justice, who knows no favorites. Though not unduly partial toward the weak, yet he hears the cry of the oppressed. The Lord is not deaf to the wail of the orphan, nor to the widow when she pours out her complaint." Mere virtue-signaling, one assumes. The passage from Luke's Gospel was the story of the self-righteous Pharisee who praises his own virtue. The Pharisee's pride is contrasted with the humility of the tax collector who begged forgiveness for his sins: "I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former; for whoever exalts himself will be humbled and the one who humbles himself will be exalted." Whatever the truth of Barr's speech, there was nothing humble about it.

In a remarkably prescient piece written in 1996 titled "Looking Backwards from the Year 2096," the philosopher Richard Rorty speculated that America's democratic institutions would break down in 2014 under the relentless demands of a globalized economy, ushering in an era of authoritarian rule. Rorty speculated that a new birth of democracy, one that embraced the relationship between "the moral order and the economic order," would arrive in 2096. "Just as twentieth-century Americans had trouble imagining how their pre-Civil War ancestors could have stomached slavery, so we at the end of the twenty-first century have trouble imagining how our great-grandparents could have legally permitted a CEO to get 20 times more than her lowest paid employees," he foretells. "Such inequalities seem to us evident moral abominations, but the vast majority of our ancestors took them to be regrettable necessities.... Looking back, we think how easy it would have been for our great-grandfathers to have forestalled the social collapse that resulted from these economic pressures. They could have insisted that all classes had to confront the new global economy together.... They might have brought the country together by bringing back its old pride in fraternal ideals." Fraternal ideals! Not very "micro," but perhaps Judeo-Christian in the best sense.

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JOSEPH AMAR

St. Ephrem's Lament

Syrian Christians have been abandoned more than once.

In an about-face that was as stunning as it was ill conceived, the undisputed symbol of Western supremacy in a war-torn part of the Middle East turned its back on a faithful ally that had fought by its side for generations, and abruptly announced its decision to leave Syria. In a matter of days, the local militia the West had depended on to hold the line against an array of agitators, foreign and domestic, was decimated. No less tragic was the fate of the local population. Uprooted from their ancestral lands, they were left to find refuge wherever they could. Career politicians and generals scrambled to make sense of a decision that defied all reason and understanding. A lone voice spoke for the victims. "Who can fathom the magnitude of this betrayal?"

The year was 363. The superpower that abandoned its Syrian allies was the Christian Roman Empire. And the voice that uttered the anguished cry of betrayal belonged to Ephrem of Nisibis, known more widely today as St. Ephrem the Syrian, who joined the exodus of homeless refugees.

We have come to accept that the everyday lives of the saints—what they did in their spare time—lie buried under layers of pious invention. Still, it is hard to imagine a saint whose memory has been more thoroughly obscured by the media through which it has passed than St. Ephrem the Syrian. Within a century of his death, monks began to co-opt Ephrem into their movement, creating a biography and an archive of texts they falsely attributed to him to support the fiction that he had been a monk. The texts they created enjoyed an impressively wide circulation, reaching St. Jerome

DARLING ARCHIVE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Dormition of St. Ephrem the Syrian (Cretan, fifteenth century) in far-off Bethlehem, who contributed to the emerging profile by claiming that Ephrem had also been a deacon. Only a churchman, Jerome surmised, could have arrived at Ephrem's penetrating insight into Scripture. It did not matter that Ephrem never identified himself as a deacon. Like the monks who invented a caricature of the monastic life that never existed, Jerome had no firsthand knowledge of Ephrem.

But in and around the Syrian city of Nisibis, where Ephrem was born and spent the greater part of his life, the memory of a living, breathing person survived. There he was remembered as an intensely charismatic figure, a poet and a prophet, whose verses, written in the Syriac dialect of Aramaic, "flowed through our land like a sweet spring of water, intoxicating us with their beauty."

Nisibis, known today as Nusaybin, lies within southeast Turkey along the border with Syria. A stronghold of the Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party, it has been under attack by the Turkish air force since 2006. Today, half the city is reduced to rubble. Qamishli, the extension of the city on the Syrian side of the border, has suffered a similar fate. Home to a mixed population of Kurds, Christians, and Yazidis who lived peaceably under the protection of the Kurdish militia, it is a bombed-out shell of its former self, the target of Turkey's war against Kurdish independence. The swath of territory along the Syrian-Turkish border is the ancestral homeland of an ancient tradition of Aramaic-speaking Christianity that is no stranger to the whims of emperors and presidents.

For as long as Ephrem lived there, Nisibis was the centerpiece of Rome's defenses against Persia, its rival to the east. The city's strategic importance in the struggle for the domination of Western Asia made it, in Ephrem's words, "the cause of strife throughout the world." That struggle took an ominous turn when Julian, the emperor Christians nicknamed "the Apostate," reverted to paganism, and invaded Persia against the advice of his own generals. The campaign was short-lived. On June 26, 363, less than three years after he came to power, Julian was killed in a failed attack on the Persian capital, Ctesiphon, southeast of modern Baghdad. Ephrem spoke for the struggling Christian minority in Nisibis when he wrote, "The miscreant got what he deserved."

When news reached Nisibis that Jovian, a devout Christian, had been chosen as Julian's successor, Ephrem could not contain his joy. The church Julian had shuttered would again welcome worshippers. No less importantly, the temple to the Syrian goddess Asherah that Julian had built in the city center would be dismantled. Ephrem recorded that the Christians of Nisibis were still celebrating when a messenger arrived with unthinkable news. To ensure safe passage out of Persian territory for what was left of his army, Jovian, the "God-fearing" emperor, had ceded Nisibis to Persia. Nisibeans, who had fought side by side with Roman troops and had taken the brunt of the battle, were given three days to leave their homes. It was the first step in the West's long retreat from the East.

While Nisibis was under Roman control, Persia had mounted three sieges against the city. Each time, the Roman army was nowhere to be found. It was left to the local militia to defend the border on Rome's behalf. "God saved us," Ephrem boasted, "without an emperor." Now, the emperor himself had turned against them. Nisibis, and in time, the rest of Syria's Christians, would have to survive on their own.

The most direct route out of Syria took Jovian and his beleaguered army past the walls of Nisibis. People streamed out of the city to take in the spectacle of Rome in ignominious retreat, and to hurl curses at the empire they had fought and died for now turned against them. Ephrem was in the crowd that day. When he saw the body of Julian being carried to its final resting place, he knew it was no coincidence. God had allowed him to view the mortal remains of the man whose need for glory had been Syria's undoing. Approaching the corpse, Ephrem spoke for the victims of Julian's arrogance. "Is this the prideful blowhard who forgot that he was dust?" Ephrem then turned to Julian's handlers, once thoughtful men, who saw in Julian's recklessness a chance to turn a profit. "How," Ephrem asked, "had they placed their trust in a man who wove a crown of death, while denying the Author of Life?"

In the decades and centuries that followed, Rome and Persia would continue their struggle for dominance in Western Asia, depleting resources and laying waste to Syria, failing to notice that a new player had entered the fray. Arab armies under the banner of Islam would press northward, eventually taking Antioch, Rome's eastern capital. The emperor Heraclius, who led Rome's final retreat from the city, is said to have paused on the hills overlooking his imperial palace long enough to utter a bitter valediction: "Farewell, dear Syria, farewell. What a beautiful land you will be for the enemy." The year was 638. Roman presence in Western Asia, begun in 64 BC under Pompey, had come to a humiliating end.

Jews were well-established in Nisibis long before Christianity made its appearance in the city. Their long history in Mesopotamia, stretching back to their captivity in Babylon, gave them a more sober perspective on the tragedy unfolding before Ephrem's eyes. A cryptic passage in the Book of Daniel reads: "Three ribs were in his mouth between his teeth" (Daniel 7:5). The Babylonian Talmud interpreted this as evidence that Nisibis and cities like it up and down Mesopotamia were nothing more than pawns in the hands of the world's superpowers, to be discarded once they had served their purpose or had become inconvenient. The ribs, wrote Rabbi Yohanan (Babylonian Talmud, *Qiddushin*, 72a), "are Helzon, Adiabene, and Nisibis, which Rome sometimes swallows, and sometimes spits out."

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Exposing the Spirits

Austen Ivereigh

What the Amazon Synod decided & what it revealed

The synod on the Amazon will be remembered as the moment that bishops gathered in Rome asked the pope to ordain married men so that the church could better serve the wretched and vulnerable in defense of their lives and land. Whatever Pope Francis does now with that request, it is an important moment for the church, a sign that the pastoral and sacramental demands of the people of God in a particular place need not always be sacrificed on the altar of uniformity. Perhaps ecclesiologists will say it was the moment that the great unresolved issue of Vatican II—whether the local or the universal should take precedence—finally settled on a proper balance.

But the three-week gathering of close to three hundred people (182 of whom could vote on the final document) was about much more. Francis came closest to expressing the shift it represented in his end-of-synod address, when he urged reporters not to focus only on the who-won-what in "minor disciplinary matters" but to "take time to look at the diagnoses, which is the dense part, the part where the synod expressed itself best." The Amazon was being stripped, plundered, burned; its native people, guardians of the ecosystem, were desperate for help, looking to the church to stand with them. To come close, the church had to change, to embrace new thinking—especially on what they called *ministerialidad*, the question of ministries. Grasping the problem didn't mean more study but *conversion*. And conversion began with a shift of perspective—with coming to see the world a bit more as God does.

The really exceptional thing, Fr. Antonio Spadaro, SJ, of *La Civiltà Cattolica* said, was the "radically pastoral" nature of the synod. Spadaro, who sat through all three weeks of the speeches and small-group meetings, was struck by how the bishops from Amazonia who made up the bulk of the "synod fathers" (those who can vote) shared the same pastoral challenge: how the church could better serve their hurting people, how it could stand with them against what the final document calls "the predatory extractivism that responds to the logic of greed, typical of the dominant technocratic paradigm." The beauty of the synod was not only that it asked that question, but that, through frank and honest exchanges, in prayer and in dialogue, it got some answers.

The native peoples' leaders at the synod were key to its pastoral conversion. Their stories of suffering and of the astonishing violence directed against them formed a constant backdrop, as did their expressions of faith in Jesus and in his church. "The politicians don't listen to us, but you are listening us" was the message many of them gave the bishops. José Gregorio Díaz Mirabal, a Venezuelan leader from the Curipaco people, said the Catholic Church was "the only institution that is asking the world to wake up to what's happening, and to save us." He had asked the pope to "stop the invasions from outside" and to protect his people, because when they stood up for their rights they were imprisoned or even killed. Yesica Patiachi Tayori, a bilingual teacher from the Harakbut people in Peru, stood up to tell the pope: "Brother Francis, you seem alone, but you are not alone. The native peoples of the Amazon are with you!"

The question was how the church could in turn be with them. The ecological question was also the "ministries" question. When almost all the local players in the region—the politicians, the foreign investors, mining companies, cattle ranchers, the prosperity-gospel evangelists—are in thrall to what the pope has called the technocratic paradigm, who but Catholic Amazonians will defend the integral ecology of the Kingdom of God? Yet how, in remote areas where they might be able to celebrate the Eucharist no more than once a year?

CNS PHOTO / PAUL HARING

Pope Francis accepts a plant during the offertory as he celebrates the concluding Mass of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon at the Vatican, October 27, 2019.

To answer that question the synod had to ask what kind of church it would be if it heard the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth as one cry, and responded as Christ would. The way toward an answer was in the final document: a church that is permanently undergoing a fourfold conversion—cultural, pastoral, ecological, and synodal—to become Samaritan, merciful, missionary, "inserted and inculturated," a servant church, educating and evangelizing, standing with the people in defense of their rights and their land.

The pope asked the synod more than once for *un desborde*, a Spanish word that means a river breaking its banks in response to a sudden flow of water. He wanted to open up the synod's thinking like that, so that the Holy Spirit could overflow. What emerged was a vision and a mission. "We may not be able to modify immediately the destructive model of extractivist development, but we do need to know and make clear where we stand, whose side we are on," the final document reads. The church had to defend the life of the poor: of the people, of creation, of family, of culture. In asking how the church could do so given its paucity of resources, the vast distances involved, and the great powers it must face down, the Amazon synod was doing what synods do best, not just repeating familiar propositions, but searching for new answers to urgent pastoral questions.

Dom Neri José Tondello, bishop of Juína in Brazil's Mato Grosso, led Portuguese A, one of the small groups that boldly called—as more than half of them did—for a women's diaconate and married priests. Juína diocese is on the edge of the Amazon region, at least two days' drive from Manaus, and covers around fifty thousand square miles. It has 130,000 Catholics—including seven thousand indigenous in twenty-seven villages and eleven ethnic groups—spread over thirteen immense parishes or mission areas, each of which has dozens of "base ecclesial communities." Dom Neri has twenty priests, ten permanent deacons, and sixteen women religious, plus many hundreds of catechists and "animators"—essentially leaders of the base communities.

Dom Neri and most of the other Amazonian synod fathers supported the proposal made in the synod by retired bishop of Xingú and local church hero Dom Erwin Krautler to ordain suitable married "elders" of proven virtue, *viri probati*, who would in most cases be the "animators" of those communities. They argued that priests rushing from community to community cannot possibly "know the smell of their sheep," to use the pope's famous phrase, and therefore a new type of priest—not replacing the celibate priesthood, but alongside it—is needed, at least in these missionary zones. The move was key to moving from a pastoral model based on visits to one based on presence. By introducing ordained ministry back into the community, the church could enable access to the sacraments but also better inculturate the priesthood. This question was also linked to the principle of synodality: good priests don't just fly in and make arbitrary decisions but consult with local people. In dioceses like Dom Neri's, therefore, a priesthood like that of the first millennium—local married elders, rather than young men trained in far-off seminaries as a separate class—made far more sense.

But inside the synod hall the Amazonian bishops faced intense opposition from the minority of curial cardinals, who said this was a universal question: the impact of ordaining *viri probati* in one region would be to undermine celibacy worldwide. Some said no such decision could be made by this synod, but would require its own special synod. Those who took their inspiration from Dom Erwin Krautler replied that the Amazonian bishops should not be prevented from discussing a proposal for their own region as long as that proposal did not directly affect the church elsewhere. The law of celibacy was not intrinsic to priesthood, and the church had made other exceptions to it. The Eucharist, by contrast, was essential to the sustenance of the People of God, and to sacrifice it to a clerical discipline was not the Gospel.

There were many positions in between. Many of the non-Amazonian but also non-curial synod fathers wanted to respect the discernment of the local church but worried that the *viri probati* proposal would be too "fungible," as one archbishop put it to me. His concern was that his seminarians would look over to the Amazon and ask, "Why do I have to be celibate?" He believed there needed to be a clear answer to that question, a way of showing that Amazonia was indeed a special case. Others wanted to be sure that the *viri probati* were on a distinct track, so you didn't get, say, a seminarian on his way to ordination deciding to get married.

You can see traces of the struggling and the horsetrading in the final document's paragraph 111—the one proposing the ordination of *viri probati*. It received a majority of more than two-thirds (128 votes) but also the largest number of negative votes (41). The synod fathers said celibacy was "a gift of God to the extent that this gift enables the missionary disciple, ordained to the priesthood,

The Amazon synod was doing what synods do best: not just repeating familiar propositions, but searching for new answers to urgent pastoral questions.

An aerial view shows a deforested plot of the Amazon near Porto Velho, Brazil, September 17, 2019. Brazilian Cardinal Claudio Hummes, relator general of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon, presided at Mass on October 20 in Rome's catacombs, where he and other synod participants promised to defend the Amazon rainforest and promote an "integral ecology" of care for people and the earth.

CNS PHOTO / BRUNO KELLY, REUTERS

to dedicate himself fully to the service of the Holy People of God." But they had no truck with the argument made by some of the conservative *curiali*, that there was some kind of ontological connection between being a priest and not marrying. Celibacy has "many reasons of convenience" with the priesthood, the synod fathers said, but is not required by it. Appealing to the argument from *Lumen gentium* 13 that "legitimate diversity does not harm the community and unity of the Church, but expresses and serves it," paragraph 111 proposed to establish "criteria and dispositions on the part of the competent authority" to ordain *viri probati*—essentially a dispensation from celibacy.

Significantly, the final document proposes ordaining not "elders"—the term used in the Krautler/Lobinger proposal—but rather "suitable and recognized men of the community" who have "a fruitful permanent diaconate" along with a "legitimately constituted and stable family." In other words, these are longstanding permanent deacons, not seminarians with doubts about celibacy. In order to allay fears of fungibility, paragraph 111 adds that the mission of these *viri probati* is geographically confined, to "sustain the life of the Christian community through the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the Sacraments in the most remote areas of the Amazon region."

The archbishop worried about the effect on his seminarians was happy. So was Dom Neri. When I met him the day after the vote, he was sending the key paragraph to one of his permanent deacons. Now in his fifties, the deacon left seminary in order to marry, but went on to have a fruitful diaconate, and hopes one day to be ordained a priest. "It's what was possible," Dom Neri says of the text. "They were wise: they didn't force it, but they opened the door." Of course, the pope has to respond in an exhortation likely to be out before the end of the year. But Dom Neri thinks much will now depend on the new pan-Amazonian bishops' body the document calls for ("a permanent and representative episcopal organism that promotes synodality in the Amazon region"). He thinks that body—the pope described it in his speech as a kind of bishops' conference for the region—will eventually request that the pope delegate to it his authority to dispense from celibacy on a case-by-case basis. Dom Neri also sees a way forward in the Amazonian Rite that the synod's final report also proposes. This could start as a special liturgical rite incorporating aboriginal symbols and rituals but eventually evolve into a *sui iuris* church like that of the Copts or the Chaldeans. Because most of the twenty-three different rites in the Catholic Church already have some form of married priesthood, this would make the Amazonian *viri probati* even less threatening to a Latin Rite that for the past millennium has insisted on mandatory celibacy.

In his end-of-synod speech, the pope seemed to want the Amazonian bishops to push in that direction, noting that many of the twenty-three churches with their own rites "started out small, but building traditions as the Lord led them." He said they "shouldn't be afraid" of pushing out in that direction, always under the guidance of the universal Church.

It was after the conquistador Francisco de Orellana saw women fighting pitched battles on its banks that he named the Amazon after the Greek warrior women of myth. The three dozen women taking part as experts and auditors at the synod were tough too: indigenous leaders fighting for land and human rights, religious sisters on the frontline of the fight against human trafficking, as well as women church leaders who act as catechists and animators, in effect running the base communities that are the basic unit of the church in the Amazon. Some 60 percent of Catholic communities in the region are led by women.

Time and again the women who participated in the synod expressed their satisfaction that they were treated as equals, even dubbing themselves "synod mothers." Many of them urged that their leadership be formally recognized in the Amazon, through the female diaconate and in other ways. Sr. Inés Azucena Zambrano Jara, an Ecuadorian nun working in Colombia to protect and enhance the place of native women, said that a female diaconate would "confirm our identities, our baptismal nature" and most of the Amazonian bishops also favored a female diaconate in order to strengthen the church's presence through a whole variety of new ministries. Dom Neri's group, for example, urged that the "minor orders" of lector and acolyte also be opened to women. Another Brazilian group argued that if Vatican II had opened the permanent diaconate to men for the good for the church, "the same argument is valid to create a diaconate for women in Amazonia."

The final document fell short of backing that call, offering instead to "share our experiences and reflections" with the experts Francis appointed in 2016 to look into the issue. That might look like a damp squib—and many women observers and participants were indeed disappointed—but almost everyone failed to notice that the document offers something far more radical: a call for "the institution of ministry for female leadership of the community" in recognition of "the ministry that Jesus reserved for women." True, the expansion of leadership roles for women mentioned in the document mostly concerns leadership roles for lay people in general, such as "special ministries for the care of our common home." But paragraph 95 calls for the church in the Amazon "to promote and confer ministries for men and women in an equitable manner," adding that "the Bishop may entrust, for a specific period of time, in the absence of priests, the exercise of pastoral care of the communities to a person not invested with the priestly character." It adds that the bishop "may constitute this ministry on behalf of the Christian community with an official mandate through a ritual act so that the person responsible for the community is also recognized at the civil and local levels." Given that most people with pastoral duties in Amazonia are lay women, this means bishops will be conferring on lay women the presidency of local Catholic communities. Mauricio López, one of the synod organizers, told me: "In many ways this is much bigger than the female diaconate. Many women have been saying: we don't want to be clergy, we want to have our leadership and authority recognized by the bishop. Here it is."

Close to the end of the synod, a letter was handed to the pope asking that the general superiors of women's religious congregations be allowed to vote on the final document, given the absurd anomaly that delegates who are non-ordained religious brothers could do so. It didn't happen this time, but in his closing speech Francis said the religious sisters had laid down a gauntlet that he would pick up. To applause, he said he would re-open the women's-diaconate commission, with new members and with more weight, under the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith.

Every Francis synod has its shenanigans—old-fashioned Roman power games that the Curia remains expert in—as well its attacks, both ideological and spiritual. This synod was no exception. There was disgust, for example, at the way Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, the outgoing synod general secretary, removed Dom Erwin Kräutler and others from the commission that redacted the synod's final document, one of many attempts by the Curia to try to exclude members of the Latin-American group

Given that most people with pastoral duties in Amazonia are lay women, this means bishops will be conferring on lay women the presidency of local Catholic communities.

linked to REPAM, the Pan-Amazonian church network created in 2013 that has organized the remarkable three-year preparation of the synod in the region.

Perhaps because of that gutting of the redaction committee, the draft of the final document handed to synod fathers at the beginning of the final week was a huge shock. The *viri probati* and the female diaconate were there, but it wholly failed to capture the thinking and vision that had emerged in the synod ("totally uninspiring!" one synod father told me.) A group of bishops went to the pope, who agreed that a major revision was needed. The redaction commission was re-formed, and experts were brought in to help incorporate into a new *relatio synodi* the 831 *modi*, or amendments, produced by the twelve small groups. In just two days and one long night, the commission had hammered out an uplifting thirty-three-page document, every paragraph of which passed with a two-thirds majority.

The attacks on the synod began long before the bishops gathered in Rome, mostly from an alliance of ideological convenience between right-wing traditionalists clustered around an integralist Brazilian movement called Tradition, Family and Property (TFP), populist nationalists linked to Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, who has backed exploitation of the Amazon and accused the church of interfering with state sovereignty, and the North American conservative Catholic media such as LifeSite News and EWTN, whose assumption is that all change is a surrender to modernity. Prior to the synod they ran interviews and articles that sought to portray the synod as heretical, syncretistic, Marxist, and a backdoor attempt by Francis to impose his "liberal agenda" on the church.

At the start of the synod the opposition created a major media distraction by claiming that indigenous people were "worshiping idols" in the Vatican gardens (see "A Hermeneutic of Suspicion," page 11). The original story by an EWTN-owned news agency, claiming that knee-high wooden figurines (bare-breasted, pregnant Amazonian women) were pre-Columbian fertility symbols, led to opposition media demanding from bewildered Vatican officials a definitive statement as to whether or not the figurines were "pagan." Then, on October 21, LifeSite News publicized a video showing two unidentified men removing the figurines from a church close to the Vatican and tossing them into the Tiber. One of the men later identified himself as a young Austrian "anti-globalist" who dreamed of restoring "Catholic culture and traditions."

As news spread, so did the disgust within the synod. Indigenous leaders were amazed at the contrast between the respect they were shown inside—where the pope had at one point bowed his head and asked for their blessing—and the contempt from North American Catholic media. "You may not recognize or like the forms we have to express ourselves," one native leader, shaking with emotion, told journalists, "but at the heart of everything we do and believe is Jesus Christ." The Vatican accused ultra-conservative Catholic social media of fomenting hate, saying the statues were "an effigy of maternity and the sacredness of life." Cardinal Pedro Barreto, who co-presided at the assembly, said the theft of the images contradicted one of the key lessons of the synod, which was respect for culture as the "seed of the Word" and showed astonishing ignorance. The controversy was of course a distraction from the synod, but in another way it highlighted the need for conversion that the synod was addressing. In Ignatian terms, this episode had exposed the spirits: the spirit of the synod—joyful, respectful, pastoral, close to the poor—and its opposite: the spirit of hate, contempt, fear.

Which makes the final document's triumph, especially on the topic of inculturation, even more beautiful. "Christ in His incarnation left aside his divine prerogative and became man in a concrete culture in order to identify himself with all humanity," the document notes, quoting St. Irenaeus that "what is not assumed is not redeemed." "Only an inserted and inculturated missionary Church will promote the emergence of particular autochthonous Churches, with an Amazonian face and heart, rooted in the cultures and traditions proper to the people," the document went on, before describing how those cultures offered the "seeds of the Word" in their ancestral values, their "integrating vision"—and of course their connectedness to nature.

The day before the vote, the pope announced that three of the stolen figurines had been recovered from the Tiber by policemen and were back on display inside the synod hall, looking peaceful and quite unperturbed by the violence done to them by unnamed fanatics. The brief period during which they were missing happened to coincide with the extraordinary effort to save the synod's final document. Judging by the result, it was the first beautiful miracle of Our Lady of the Amazon and the Tiber.

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Untempted by the Consequences

John Schwenkler

The philosopher G.E.M. Anscombe was fearless in argument, taking on C. S. Lewis, Bernard Williams, and Harry Truman. But she believed that ‘doing the truth’ was about much more than winning a debate.

G.E.M. Anscombe in 1990.
Photograph by Steve Pyke, Getty Images.

“The women are up to something in Convocation,” the dons of St. John’s College, Oxford, were warned. “We have to go and vote them down.”

The women at issue were led by a young philosopher named G.E.M. (Elizabeth) Anscombe, who was then a tutor at Somerville, one of the oldest women’s colleges at the University of Oxford. Anscombe had come to Somerville in 1946 on a research fellowship. At that time she was a student of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who entrusted her with the translation of his *Philosophical Investigations*, which appeared in 1953, two years after his death. Now, in 1956, Anscombe was opposing the university’s decision to grant an honorary degree to former U.S. President Harry Truman.

Speaking on the floor of Convocation to her colleagues on May 1, 1956, Anscombe said that her opposition to granting Truman’s degree was based on his responsibility for dropping the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. “If you do give this honor,” she asked, “what Nero, what Genghis Khan, what Hitler, or what Stalin will not be honored in the future?” In response, a representative of the Hebdomadal Council, then the university’s chief executive body, argued that Anscombe had overstated Truman’s responsibility. “A great many people were involved in the responsibility of the manufacture and delivery of the bomb,” he told the faculty, “and we cannot select one man as being solely responsible, even if his was the signature at the bottom of the order for the bomb to be dropped.”

Anscombe’s cause was doomed to fail. Reports in the Manchester *Guardian* and the *Times* of London claimed that no other faculty echoed her dissenting vote, though subsequent reports indicate that three or four had joined her—and Anscombe later dedicated the pamphlet “Mr. Truman’s Degree,” in which she explained the rationale for her opposition, “with respect, but without permission, to the others who said ‘*Non placet*.’” In the speech she gave to her colleagues on the day of the vote, she acknowledged that these voices were not going to prevail, saying that she had “no ambition or hope to carry the House with me in this, but my hope is that this honorary degree will not be offered without opposition being expressed.”

Truman received his degree at the university’s Encaenia ceremony on June 20, 1956. In a speech awarding the degree, the Chancellor praised him as “most staunch of allies, direct in your speech and in your writings, and ever a pattern of simple courage.” Anscombe, who had concluded her pamphlet with the warning that she herself “should fear to go” to Encaenia “in case God’s patience suddenly ends,” had kept away from the ceremony, telling the *Guardian* that she “would spend the day working as usual.”

The protest against Truman was hardly Elizabeth Anscombe's first foray into public controversy. As an undergraduate in 1939, just a year after entering the Catholic Church under the tutelage of the Dominican friars at Oxford, Anscombe and her friend Norman Daniel published a pamphlet titled "The Justice of the Present War Examined: A criticism based on traditional Catholic principles and on natural reason." It presented "the results achieved in a series of open discussions held at Oxford both before and after" Britain's declaration of war against Nazi Germany in September of that year. Anscombe and Daniel concluded that the war against Germany was unjust, partly because it would involve the deliberate massacre of civilian populations.

"We have it," they wrote, following Thomas Aquinas, "that no one may be deliberately attacked in war, unless his actions constitute an attack on the rights which are being defended or restored. To deny this will be to assert that we may attack any one anywhere, whose life in any way hinders the prosecution of the war, or in any way assists our enemies; and such a conclusion is as immoral as to be a reductio ad absurdum in itself."

Anscombe and Daniel's pamphlet did not receive anything like the attention of her protest against Truman seventeen years later, which was picked up by the Associated Press and covered in newspapers across the United States and other parts of the world. (A report from Reuters, under the headline "WOMAN DON FAILS TO HALT TRUMAN DEGREE TO OXFORD," mistakenly gave her first name as "Gladys" rather than "Gertrude.") The pamphlet did, however, make enough of an impact that in 1940 the Archbishop of Birmingham wrote to a priest at Oxford complaining that Anscombe and Daniel had it "printed and brought out without submitting it to ecclesiastical authority," and inquiring as to whether they were "deliberately taking a line opposed to that of the hierarchy of this country."

Despite the need for some sort of military action against Nazi Germany, Anscombe and Daniel were clearly right on two very important points. First, the war that Britain actually waged against the Axis Powers *did* involve attacks that were targeted directly at civilian populations and, second, a war carried out by such means *does* violate a central principle of the church's just-war teaching. It is possible that the war could have been fought without deploying these tactics, and it might have been just if it had been. But Anscombe and Daniel were correct in predicting that it *would* not be waged in that way. Acknowledging that "to some their arguments may seem temerarious," they aimed in their pamphlet "to make the Christian tradition clear, to examine the mind of the Church in a rational and scientific manner."

While Anscombe and Daniel's 1939 pamphlet was addressed exclusively to fellow Catholics and Christians, Anscombe's protest of 1956 had a quite different audience. Indeed, in writing her pamphlet "Mr. Truman's Degree," Anscombe saw that many of her Oxford colleagues were prepared to accept a conclusion that she and Daniel had presented as a reductio ad absurdum. These philosophers endorsed a doctrine that Anscombe came to call *consequentialism*, according to which there are no *kinds* of action—such as murder, rape, torture, and adultery, for example—that any person is prohibited from doing regardless of the situation he or she is in. According to this doctrine it *can* be right to "attack any one anywhere," as long as the balance of the consequences speaks strongly enough in favor of it. Faced with a group that found this conclusion acceptable, Anscombe needed to try a different tack.

It was as an Oxford undergraduate that Anscombe met her husband, a fellow Catholic convert named Peter Geach, at a Corpus Christi procession in 1938. They married three years later, and during the first few years of marriage they lived apart from one another. Geach worked in a pine forest as a conscientious objector to World War II while Anscombe studied at Oxford and Cambridge. During this time they had two children—the first of seven they would have together, despite often working at universities in separate cities.

Anscombe became a student of Ludwig Wittgenstein shortly after arriving at Cambridge on a research fellowship in 1942, during which time Geach was engaged in forestry work. Wittgenstein was by then a major figure in the world of philosophy, having published his influential *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* two decades earlier. Many students at Cambridge were extremely devoted to him. The Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle would later describe the reverential atmosphere at Wittgenstein's lectures as "pedagogically disastrous for the students and unhealthy for Wittgenstein himself." But Anscombe's own view of this dynamic was quite different. In her remembrances of Wittgenstein, she described the attention he would pay to his students as he helped them work through philosophical questions. "Wittgenstein very often seemed to understand one's philosophical thought and problems better than one did oneself," she wrote. "One would say what one thought—then he would amplify it, make it seem more convincing, carry it deeper—and then undo it."

As a teacher Wittgenstein was notoriously unaccommodating for female students, but he quickly took a liking to Anscombe and would refer to her, affectionately, as "old man." In his biography of Wittgenstein, *The Duty of Genius*, Ray Monk writes that on one occasion, when Wittgenstein found that there were no other women students remaining at his lecture, he turned to Anscombe and said, "Thank God we've got rid of the women!" A letter that he wrote in 1945 in support of Anscombe's application for a research fellowship characterized her as "undoubtedly, the most talented female student I have had since 1930, when I began to lecture; and among my male students only eight, or ten have surpassed her." It was not long before Anscombe would surpass those eight or ten as well.

Upon discovering once that Anscombe had no wastepaper basket at her lodging in Oxford, Wittgenstein said "You are a writer, you have to have a wastepaper basket"—and he took her out to buy one.

The influence of Wittgenstein on Anscombe's philosophical writing is immense, in both substance and style. Both of them attend closely to ordinary speech and other forms of human expression and interaction, and reject the demand that philosophy deliver a *theory* to resolve the questions that we face. While Anscombe presented arguments for straightforward conclusions in many of her philosophical writings, this was always in a way that gave intense consideration to conceptual difficulties and counterarguments. Meanwhile, others of her writings are like Wittgenstein's in that they deliver no thesis at all but rather take up a question and simply attack it from all sides. In her remembrances of Wittgenstein, Anscombe wrote that he once reproached her for the tendency they both shared to get stuck in philosophical problems. "You know," he told her, "you strike me as like a person who is walking along a road and comes to a lamp post which is in his way. And [this person] says: 'There's a lamp post. I can't go on.' It doesn't occur to you to walk around the lamp post—I have a *prejudice*, which is that problems are insoluble."

Wittgenstein could be critical of Anscombe's written work to a degree that most academics today could barely imagine. Her notebooks recall how, of some of her writing, "he said, 'Bought for a farthing' and 'Shit on the floor'—though the way *he* put this latter to *me* was 'Not house-trained.'" Her husband Peter Geach once told her that having Wittgenstein come to stay with them "was like having a young atom bomb in the house." Yet Anscombe also wrote of how "kind and considerate" Wittgenstein was, always prepared to help and advise even when this meant interrupting his work, and of how he "hated meanness" and was not "carelessly amiable or carelessly generous." (Upon discovering once that Anscombe had no wastepaper basket at her lodging in Oxford, Wittgenstein said "You are a *writer*, you have to have a wastepaper basket"—and he took her out to buy one.) And she also expressed a wish to capture better in her remembrances of her teacher "how funny he could be—but it is possible that the jokes which came often in his lectures and his talks were just for the moment."

Anscombe's attitude toward religious topics stood in stark contrast to Wittgenstein's. While she was a convert to Catholicism whose earliest encounter with philosophy came in an attempt to formalize a proof of God's existence, Wittgenstein was raised in a Catholic household but had decided around the age of nine that, as Anscombe put it, "the Christian religion (that Catholic one which they were taught) was all a rubble." Though some of Wittgenstein's unpublished remarks from the 1930s show him expressing an openness to Christianity, he is reported to have said, in reference to Anscombe and another Catholic student of his, Yorick Smythies, that "I could not possibly bring myself to believe all the things they believe." In his posthumous work *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein described this kind of clash between irreconcilable attitudes as one in which two worldviews are so totally opposed that there is no way to give *reasons* that can be engaged by the other side. The discovery of having been wrong to such an extent would be such that "the foundation of all judging would be taken away from me."

Despite all this, at one point in 1950 Wittgenstein asked Anscombe to put him in touch with a "non-philosophical" priest, wishing as Ray Monk puts it "to talk to [the] priest as a priest" rather than "to discuss philosophical problems." While the priest took this as part of an attempt by Wittgenstein to return to his childhood Catholicism, Anscombe herself reportedly doubted this. There were, however, arrangements made by this priest for Wittgenstein to live the life of a brother in a Dominican priory—a plan that had to be abandoned due to his bad health. When Wittgenstein died in 1951 Anscombe was one of a small group at his side that included Yorick Smythies, who brought with him the priest Wittgenstein had met. It was agreed that, since Wittgenstein had expressed hope that his Catholic friends would pray for him, this priest should be allowed to administer last rites.

Wittgenstein was given a Catholic burial the next morning—a decision that was, as Monk argues, surely improper given his professed lack of faith, even as it reflected the religious intensity with which Wittgenstein had lived.

After her contribution to the pamphlet with Norman Daniel, the earliest of Anscombe's published writings is from 1948, based on a debate she had with C. S. Lewis, who was then a fellow at Magdalen College, Oxford. The debate took place in Oxford's Socratic Club, and concerned the third chapter of Lewis's book *Miracles*, which argues that human thought cannot be relied on "if it can be fully explained as the result of irrational causes." This argument was supposed to show that the only way to have a reasonable belief in the reliability of human reason is to believe in a supernatural God.

Anscombe criticized Lewis's argument, claiming that it was based "on a confusion between the concepts of cause and reason." In evaluating, for example, the quality of the argument in a piece of writing, our concern with whether it expresses *good reasoning* is not about "the circumstances of its production," but rather about whether the evidence it offers is sufficient to prove its conclusion. She also argued that the term "explanation" can encompass many different things, and that a *causal* explanation of human thought and behavior in terms of regular patterns in the universe would not preclude there also being explanations in terms of the *reasons* why people act and believe as they do. Both of these arguments likely had their roots in Anscombe's interactions with Wittgenstein, as they mirrored ideas that were central to his *Philosophical Investigations*, and that Anscombe would develop in her own work of the following decade.

There was for some time a lot of controversy over how Lewis was affected by this episode. Anscombe wrote to Wittgenstein the day after the debate that Lewis had been "much more decent in discussion than I expected, though he was glib and played all sorts of tricks to obscure the issue." She did add, however, that during the discussion the secretary of the club "started going for Lewis, who had said something about having written the book 'at a fairly popular level'—he [the secretary] reproached him almost in moral terms, that one should not, for the sake of popularizing, put up a bad argument." While several of Lewis's biographers claimed that the debate humiliated him and was the end of his career as a public intellectual, Anscombe later wrote that those who knew Lewis reported no such thing at the time, and noted that Lewis revised the argument of that chapter for the second edition of *Miracles*, presenting it in a way that she found more appropriate "to the actual depth and difficulty of the question being discussed."

The closing paragraphs of Anscombe's pamphlet "Mr. Truman's Degree" raised the question of "why so many Oxford people are willing to flatter" a man who had approved the massacre of entire cities. "I get some small light on this subject," Anscombe wrote, "when I consider the productions of Oxford moral philosophy since the First World War, which I have lately had occasion to read." (While her early research interests had been in metaphysics and the philosophy of mind, it was when her Somerville colleague Philippa Foot spent a year visiting in America that Anscombe began reading modern ethicists in order to take over Foot's course in moral philosophy.) One important strand that Anscombe identified in these philosophers was "a doctrine that it is impossible to have any quite general moral laws." According to this doctrine:

> [S]uch laws as "It is wrong to lie" or "Never commit sodomy" are rules of thumb which an experienced person knows when to break. Further, both his selection of these as the rules on which to proceed, and his tactful adjustments of them in particular cases, are based on their fitting together with the "way of life" which is his preference.… These philosophies, then, contain a repudiation of the idea that any class of actions, such as murder, may be absolutely excluded.

This, again, is what Anscombe would call the *consequentialist* doctrine that any type of action can in principle be justified by considering its likely consequences. According to this logic, it was because his action ended up saving lives, by bringing an earlier end to the war, that Truman was justified in massacring the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In "Modern Moral Philosophy," the influential 1958 paper in which she introduced the term "consequentialism," Anscombe went to greater length in identifying the error that her Oxford colleagues had committed. This followed a BBC radio address given about a year earlier, in which Anscombe had posed the question "Does Oxford moral philosophy corrupt youth?" and answered it in the negative: the youth were not corrupted, she said, since these philosophers only taught the bad moral views that young people held anyway. Anscombe's 1958 paper began with a whirlwind history in which she dismissed a series of moral philosophers from David Hume ("sophistical") to Immanuel Kant ("useless") to John Stuart Mill ("stupid") to Henry Sidgwick ("dull" and "vulgar"), and then took aim at the "shallow," "provincial," and "corrupt" work of her contemporaries. The latter criticism centered on a conception of intentional action that Anscombe located in the work of Sidgwick, according to which a person "must be said to intend any foreseen consequences of [their] voluntary action." On Anscombe's reading, Sidgwick used this definition "to put forward an ethical thesis which would now be accepted by many people: the thesis that it does not make any difference to a man's responsibility for something that he foresaw, that he felt no desire for it, either as an end or as a means to an end."

Anscombe illustrated the upshot of this thesis with a simple example. According to a view like Sidgwick's, there is no difference between the responsibility a man has for withdrawing material support from his children if he does this in order to achieve some further end, and the responsibility the same man would have if he was imprisoned for refusing to commit a disgraceful act. In both cases the man *foresees* that his choice will have the consequence of withdrawing material support from his children. Therefore, according to Sidgwick's view, in each case the man is responsible *in the same way* for this outcome.

It is straightforward to extend this analysis to Truman's decision to bomb the Japanese cities. Truman could foresee that his decision would lead to the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians. Yet, his defenders claim, a similar or greater number of civilians would have been killed had he chosen *not* to drop the bombs. On this analysis, Truman would have been *equally responsible* for the civilian deaths in either case. So the only thing that matters is whether he made the choice that led to better consequences overall—that is, to fewer total deaths.

Anscombe noted in "Modern Moral Philosophy" how surprising it was that none of the philosophers who accepted this position displayed any awareness of how their conclusions were "quite incompatible with the Hebrew–Christian ethic." According to this ethic, she wrote, "there are certain things forbidden whatever *consequences* threaten," and faced with the possibility of doing these things "*you are not to be tempted by fear or hope of consequences*." But she saw that in her context she could not respond to this situation simply by defending traditional moral absolutes. Instead, the way forward was to begin "*by banishing ethics totally* from our minds," in order to consider "simply as part of the philosophy of psychology" the concepts that ethical thinking presupposes. Among these she listed "action," "intention," and "wanting"—all of which are explored at length in the short book she had published a year earlier under the simple title *Intention*.

Anscombe's *Intention* is an extraordinarily dense and difficult book, even by the standards of contemporary philosophy. It is just ninety-four pages long, comprising fifty-two numbered sections that range in length from a single paragraph to four or five pages. In this space the book treats an exhausting range of topics—and yet it has no obvious structure, no theses introduced at the beginning or stated clearly at the end, and barely any reference to the authors whose work it engages. It baffled several reviewers when it first appeared, and for a while went out of print. Yet when Harvard University Press reissued Anscombe's book in 2001, the following quotation from the philosopher Donald Davidson appeared on the cover: "Anscombe's *Intention* is the most important treatment of action since Aristotle."

Anscombe would likely have objected that such praise overlooked at least the importance of Thomas Aquinas, whose influence is everywhere in *Intention*, even though his name appears only in one stray footnote. Anscombe's daughter, Mary Geach, wrote in 2011 that her mother "drew on [Aquinas's] thought to an unknowable extent: she said to me that it aroused prejudice in people to tell them that a thought came from him: to my sister she said that to ascribe a thought to him made people boringly ignore the philosophical interest of it, whether they were for Aquinas or against him." Because of this, rather than repeating Aquinas's theses and rehearsing his arguments for them—an approach entirely out of keeping with the way Aquinas himself built on the work of philosophers like Aristotle and St. Augustine—Anscombe's writing appropriates Aquinas's ideas in a fresh and novel guise, free of scholastic terminology and ready to be engaged by the contemporary reader.

Because of its scope and style, *Intention* resists easy summary. Anscombe is opposed throughout the book to thinking of intention primarily as a matter of one's internal psychology—as the *objective* one has in doing a certain thing, or the *willingness* to do a thing on a certain occasion. At one point she identifies Wittgenstein as having advanced such a view in his *Tractatus*: "The world is independent of my will," Wittgenstein wrote, and so action depends on a "presumed physical connexion" between one's will and one's bodily movements. In a notebook that likely dates from the 1950s, Anscombe cited this passage and wrote of feeling "more certain that

POETRY

ON THE FEAST OF STEPHEN

Stephen Rybicki

Wasn't it always his undying
Love first attracted us

And not that rogue star
Made followers—nor the

Crèche and its accoutrements

(Or the bloody tree)

The dark day itself spent alone
With nary the holy family—

And yet came next morning—none
Too soon—
And the stoning of Stephen

Seeing that old man in deep snow
Caroling—like the image of poor Christ
Right from Dostoyevsky—

Inviting him into paradise.

STEPHEN RYBICKI *is a poet and reference librarian at Macomb Community College, and lives in Romeo, Michigan.*

For Anscombe, what made the Christian teaching on sexuality so important was precisely that this teaching was not "traditional": it put Christians "at odds with the heathen world," not only in the monasteries but "as part of the ordinary calling of a Christian."

there is a mistake here than about anything else in the *Tractatus*." She continued: "I *wish* to say that 'I *do* what *happens*' when I act. The extraordinary thing is that this assumes an air of paradox." This quoted remark reappeared in the text of *Intention*, where Anscombe wrote that though "everyone who heard this formula found it extremely paradoxical," in fact it can be shown to make good sense.

In order to save this remark from paradox, Anscombe argued in her book that we use the concept of intention to describe *what happens* in most of our ordinary ways of describing human life. Imagine, for example, that you come into Anscombe's study and find her sitting at her desk, with a pen in her hand that she is moving across the page. What is she doing? Writing, you will answer—and in describing her movements in this way you have already gone beyond a description in terms of physical bodies and forces. Mere physical objects can shatter, rise, and roll down hills, but they cannot write, jump, or walk. To describe a movement with words like these is to describe it as the execution of an intention.

How does this account apply to the case of Truman? The analysis of intention that Anscombe rejected holds that since Truman did not *want* the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to die—since their deaths were not part of his ultimate objective—they therefore fall outside the scope of his intention. By contrast, Anscombe argues that any sensible description of *what Truman did* must include the fact that he used these civilian deaths as a means to his end. These deaths were not merely incidental, since it was *by* killing the civilians that Truman brought the war to a close. Truman had innocent people killed in order to achieve his aims—and to do such a thing is to commit an act of murder.

Apart from her scholarly work, Anscombe also wrote and lectured extensively for wider audiences, usually of Catholics, on matters of popular concern. A frequent topic of this popular work is the Catholic teaching on contraception—a topic Anscombe wrote about as early as 1963, in an exchange with the Dominican friar Herbert McCabe in the pages of *New Blackfriars*. Later on, in an essay from 1972 published in *The Human World* under the title "Contraception and Chastity," Anscombe defended what she called the Christian "ideal of chastity" and argued that the use of contraceptives is in conflict with it.

For Anscombe, what made the Christian teaching on sexuality so important was precisely that this teaching was *not* "traditional": the teaching put Christians "at odds with the heathen world," not only in the life of monastics but "as part of the ordinary calling of a Christian." And, she argued, it is this view of marriage and family life that provides the rationale for the Christian ideal of chastity:

> [T]he ground of [Christian] objection to fornication and adultery was that sexual intercourse is only right in the *sort* of set-up that typically provides children with a father and mother to care for them. If it's all right to exclude children, if you can turn intercourse into something other than the reproductive type of act (I don't mean of course that every act is reproductive any more than every acorn leads to an oak-tree but it's a reproductive *type* of act) then why, if you can change it, should it be restricted to the married? Restricted, that is, to partners bound in a formal, legal, union whose fundamental purpose is the bringing up of children?

Anscombe's argument here is supposed to be a reductio ad absurdum of the claim that contraceptive intercourse is permissible: if this is allowed, she says, then all other restrictions on sexual behavior go with it. It seems possible to resist this conclusion by holding that using contraceptives only *sometimes* would not sever entirely the link between sex and reproduction. Just as a writer lands most of her words in the wastepaper basket, so most of a married couple's sexual acts won't result in any children. And what is the difference between using contraceptives and refraining from intercourse during fertile periods in order not to become pregnant?

Questions like these were the focus of two replies to Anscombe's article that were published in a subsequent issue of *The Human World*, one by Peter Winch and the other by Bernard Williams and Michael Tanner—all three professional philosophers, the latter two colleagues of Anscombe's at Cambridge, where in 1970 she had taken up the chair previously held by Wittgenstein. Winch's reply was short and substantive, arguing that the method of avoiding procreative intercourse *does* seem to change the character of "an act of intercourse considered as intentional," in just the same way as taking a contraceptive pill. Williams and Tanner made a similar argument at greater length, and also voiced displeasure with what they called Anscombe's "offensive" conclusions and spoke of how hard it was "to suppress feelings of outrage at some of her attacks on the spirit of the age, and the relish with which she launches them."

Anscombe's reply to these substantive arguments appealed to some simple analogies. In replying to Winch she asked the reader to imagine a man who operates some machinery in the course of doing his job, compared with another who deliberately sabotages this machinery and then manipulates it, perhaps by turning a crank, in a way that is superficially the same as the first man. The "wider context" between the two men's actions means that there is a difference in what each of them does—since the fact that the second man has sabotaged the machine means that he is *not* doing his job, or even "operating" the machine in a strict sense at all. So have the contracepting couple "sabotaged" the sex act by preventing it from achieving its natural end. In replying to Williams and Tanner (whom she addressed as "my friendly neighborhood philosophers") she pointed to the difference between arranging a meeting at a time when one knows a certain person will not be able to come, in order thereby to exclude that person, and physically barring an unwanted person from a meeting. The former, she wrote, "may be correctly describable as doing my organiser's duties, namely to arrange the meeting." But in physically barring an unwanted person, "I would be transgressing [those duties] by arranging to refuse him admission."

This argument raises the question of whether a married couple has any duty toward their would-be children corresponding to the one that Anscombe's organizer has to his potential guests. That is a question about the end or *aim* of married life, and such a question cannot be reduced to the casuistic application of moral principles. Here is how Anscombe addressed that wider question in the 1972 essay:

> What people are for is to home in on God, God who is the one truth that is infinitely worth knowing, the possession of which you could never get tired of, like the water which if you have you can never thirst again, because your thirst is slaked forever and always. It's this potentiality, this incredible possibility, of the knowledge of God and of sharing in His nature which Christianity holds out to people and because of this potentiality every life, right up to the last, is infinitely precious. Its potentialities in all things the world cares about may be slight; but there is always the possibility of what it's for.

In this context, Williams and Tanner's complaints on behalf of "the spirit of the age," and their charge that Anscombe was "preaching impoverishment of life," come into a different light, as she noted in her reply to them: "That one must be prepared to lose one's life to save it, that 'being poor in spirit' is blessed, that what looks like deprivation and mutilation may be the path of life, the alternative death: all this Christianity has indeed taught." She then added how strange it is "that ordinary chaste and faithful marriage should seem to exemplify" this spiritual poverty: "But that's what our age is like."

It is hard to imagine a phrase less descriptive of the life of Elizabeth Anscombe than Williams and Tanner's charge of "impoverishment." She was, by all accounts, an astoundingly rich personality, not at all mediocre or ordinary. Her house was filled with children as well as all sorts of visitors. She joked and swore, was famous for smoking cigars and drinking champagne, and loved to eat good food and cook it with her children. One great Oxford philosopher, Sir Anthony Kenny, recalls how in his days as a graduate student it was possible to drop into Anscombe's house "at any hour of day or night and start discussion of a philosophical problem." Sir Michael Dummett—who also converted to Catholicism, and who disagreed with Anscombe about contraception—recalls that tutorial meetings with her would last up to three hours rather than the usual one hour.

While not a feminist in any usual sense, Anscombe did keep her maiden name (on aesthetic grounds, apparently—"G.E.M. Anscombe" sounded better, she thought, than "G.E.M. Geach"), and she wore pants exclusively, often under a tunic. This made for some good stories. In one, Anscombe entered a restaurant in Boston where she was told that ladies were not permitted to wear pants, and so she took her pants off. In another, someone at the university told her that ladies had to wear skirts when they were lecturing, and so she began carrying a plastic bag with a skirt in it and then putting it on, over her trousers, just outside the lecture room.

The characteristics that made Anscombe one of the most exhilarating and intellectually formidable philosophers of her time also make most of her scholarly work quite inaccessible to non-specialists. Her popular writings, many of which are collected in *Faith in a Hard Ground* (2008), are a different story, though these too are not the sort of thing one is used to finding in a popular magazine. Her writing is focused, incisive, uncompromising in its commitment to what she called "doing the truth." To *do* the truth is not merely to grasp or to speak it; it also entails the kind of activism and advocacy that were such a part of Anscombe's life. A remark in one of her notebooks glosses this phrase as equivalent to "acting truthfully"—acting, that is, in such a way that this truth that we long for fills us up entirely as its vessel, animating our life and shining forth through our deeds.

In the final hours before her death, Anscombe was attended by her husband and four of her children, and she died as they finished reciting the sorrowful mysteries of the rosary. Anthony Kenny, who had been a student of Anscombe's and then carried on with her an extensive correspondence via postcard after confessing to her that he was losing his Catholic faith, recently told the story of her burial. Following a funeral Mass in Blackfriars, Cambridge, the mourners processed to the grounds in Ascension Parish where Wittgenstein had been buried some fifty years earlier. Anscombe had secured special permission to be buried next to her teacher, and the grave was dug at double the usual depth, so her husband could be laid to rest above her. Peter Geach followed her there in 2013.

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The Last Shakers?

Katherine Lucky

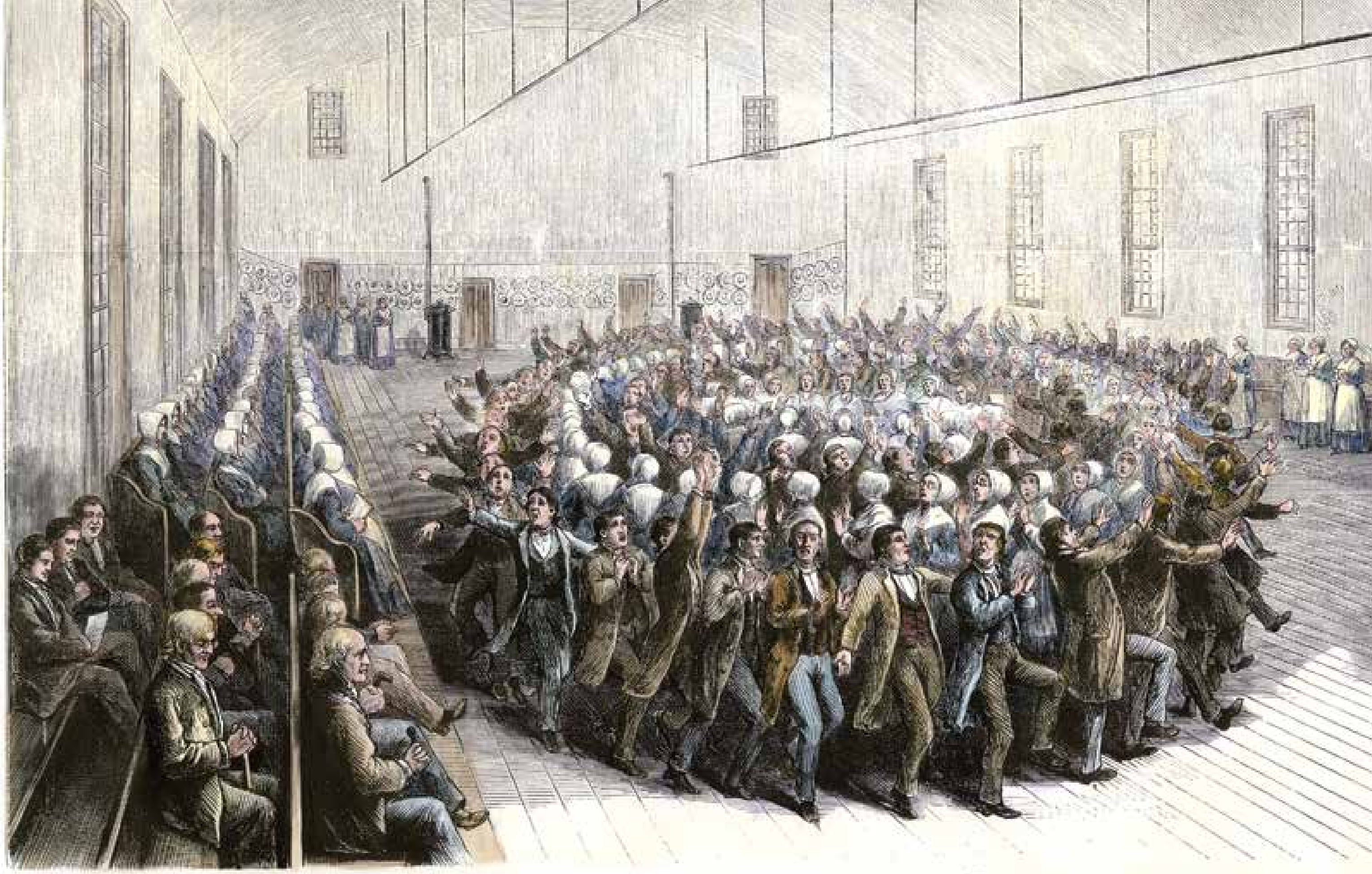
What it means to keep the faith in a religious community facing extinction

Sabbathday Lake, Maine, is home to the last community of Shakers on earth. Their sect, formally known as the United Society of Shakers, is well over two hundred years old. When I visited Sabbathday Lake in the summer of 2017, I met the only two Shakers who remained: Arnold, blue-eyed and stooped, aged sixty-two, and June, small and shy, aged eighty.

Arnold and June live together in the village Dwellinghouse, but sleep in separate beds. They are not married, nor are they lovers. They pray, read Scripture, and sing. They eat together but don't take communion; to them, every meal is the Eucharistic feast. They maintain their land and buildings, and though Arnold can do some of the physical work, they must also hire outside help. Arnold and June use computers and cellphones—the Shakers, unlike the Amish, are not averse to technology. They invented paper seed packets, the circular saw, the flat-bottom broom, and clothespins.

Arnold and June are celibate, own property in common, and confess their sins to each other. These are the essential "three Cs" of the Shakers, modeled on the chaste, communal life of Christ. To become a Shaker, you must be debt-free: no mortgages or student loans. You must also be a pacifist. Shakers are wary of nitpicky dogma, and their theology is simple: God is love; Christ's return is experienced spiritually by anyone open to the "anointing spirit of God." Shaker faith seems to be more an emulation than a rigid creed. Arnold and June, like the Shakers before them, believe they have found the best way of living, a literal heaven on earth.

Most of the "world's people" know Shakers for their woodwork: cabinets, chairs, tables. Shaker artifacts are displayed at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. But Shakers are also known for numerous scratch recipes, and a Shaker song, "Simple Gifts," inspired *Appalachian Spring*. James Fenimore Cooper, Charles Dickens, Herman Melville, and Nathaniel Hawthorne all wrote about Shakers; Ralph Waldo Emerson was an admirer.



Shaker religious exercises in the New Lebanon meeting house, New York, 1870s

NORTH WIND PICTURE ARCHIVES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

At its peak before the Civil War, the Shaker population numbered around five thousand, spread across ten states in the east and midwest. By 1900, there were 855 practicing brothers and sisters. The population was aging—and dying. Celibate, Shakers couldn't bear children into their faith; they had to rely on converts, and conversions were declining too. While villages had long taken in orphans or children from destitute families, few of those charges remained after reaching adulthood. Eventually, as states began to pass stricter laws, the Shakers, as a non-family unit, lost the right to adopt.

Over time, the loss has been compounded by a reluctance to evangelize. Shakers don't knock on doors or preach fire-and-brimstone. Instead, they wait, hoping converts will come. Sometimes, today, people do inquire, attracted to Sabbathday Lake by its austere, contemplative lifestyle, making pilgrimages to be evaluated as novices. But nobody has stayed. Either the Shakers said no, or the candidates left.

Which leaves Arnold and June. (Sister Frances, a Shaker matron, passed away in January 2017 at the age of eighty-nine.) On any given day, there are plenty of other people at the village. Staff and volunteers from nearby towns work at Sabbathday Lake: giving tours, overseeing gift shops, posting on Facebook, raking leaves, raising money, and tending the gardens. They help organize the Harvest Festival and Christmas bazaar. They teach soapmaking, bookbinding, and broomweaving, courses that generate revenue for the village. These workers are often also congregants. They attend Shaker meetings on Sunday mornings, then stick around for coffee hour. And yet, they are not Shakers. They don't divest of their property. They don't swear off sex. They don't join.

My first trip to Sabbathday Lake was on a Friday in June. Six hours of driving through summer traffic and then, as the *Maine Gazetteer* promised, the green government sign: *Shaker Road*. The village stretched out: shingles, green shutters, red barns, whitewash. Long-necked sheep and shaggy cows grazed; there were garden plots, and trees wild with fruit. At the center stood the multistory brick Dwellinghouse. Across the road that cut through the land was the Meetinghouse, where Shakers worship—two doors, two sets of stairs; one for men, the other for women. The school stood padlocked.

The essential book on Shakers is Stephen Stein's *The Shaker Experience in America* (Yale University Press, 1992). It begins before the beginning, with the story of Ann Lees: born in Manchester, England, sometime around 1736, and baptized in

1742. As a child, Lees, the daughter of a blacksmith, likely learned to read but not write; when she married another blacksmith, Abraham, she signed the church registry with just her mark. The marriage was unhappy, and ended in divorce; none of the couple's children survived to adulthood. Eventually, Ann started spending time with a group of religious enthusiasts who worshipped by shrieking and trembling. Colloquially, the group came to be called Shakers, a people who worshipped charismatically, without clergy—rolling on floors, trembling with spiritual rapture. Ann was jailed several times for her allegiance, and so the Shaker history goes, she had visions in prison. Starving, she was sustained by milk and wine, which was poured by a friend through her cell's keyholes. She even sweat blood like Jesus.

Ann Lee (at some point, her surname changed) fled England in 1774 with eight other Shakers, her brother William among them. They settled in Niskayuna, New York, and, after laying low for a time, took missionary trips to spread the Shaker gospel of celibacy, communality, and confession. They won converts and suffered persecution. On May 19, 1780, the Shakers held their first "public testimony," an open service near New Lebanon, New York, on the region's legendary "Dark Day." A mixture of fog, clouds, and forest-fire smoke turned daytime sky in the Northeast pitch black: an opportune sign for an apocalyptic people.

Eventually, Shaker settlements sprang up from Maine to Florida, Indiana to Connecticut. They took direction from the central village of Mount Lebanon and followed the example of Mother (Ann's new title), praising her as a counterpart to Christ. According to Stein, some Shakers claimed Ann was the female "dual adoption" of Christ, the complete fulfillment of God's male and female nature. But the true Shaker doctrine, according to Arnold, is that Ann is not herself Christ; rather, she is his Helpmeet and Bride.

Ann died in 1784, but the Shakers kept her teachings close. In 1816, they compiled the *Testimonies*: collected oral histories and eyewitness accounts of Mother, packed with parables and miracles. At Sabbathday Lake, in 2019, Arnold and June preserve her name in their prayers.

The eleven-dollar tour of Shaker Village began in the Meetinghouse with just one other visitor: a woman from Kentucky with two yappy dogs in a carrier.

"You coming to Shaker meeting?" asked the guide. "Ten o'clock Sunday morning. It's always been open to the public. People are always a little hesitant. 'But isn't it only two people?' Oh no. There's usually between twenty and forty."

"They just never convert," said the Kentuckian.

The guide paused. "Right…yes. And there are a lot of people who come to meeting who've been coming for many…"

The Kentuckian interrupted: "It's hard to give up stuff and sex."

Our guide remarked on the Meetinghouse's original cornflower-blue paint, milky with age. Then she took us around the village, showing off workshops staged with crafts and wares: a scarf made from a Shaker cotton-wool blend, chairs with intricate teardrop finials, a brown cider bottle for homebrews, a painting of cats. As we peered at each arrangement, the guide praised the Shakers for cleanliness, practicality, ingenuity: "Hands to work, hearts to God," as they put it.

After the tour, the Kentuckian drove away. I visited the gift shop and purchased Sister Frances's autobiography. The cashier placed the book in a sack.

"Would you ever become a Shaker?" I asked.

"No, no," she said. "Then I couldn't teach skiing in the winter."

Back outside, the village was cast in quiet. The air grew thick with humidity; a storm was coming. In the stillness, someone shouted my name. When I turned, there he was: Brother Arnold, in work clothes and boots, barreling forward from the Dwellinghouse porch.

"I can see you at two," he said to me, as if bequeathing a valuable gift. Then, as quickly as he had appeared, he vanished.

In August 1837, at the Shaker settlement in Watervliet, New York, a group of girls between the ages of ten and fourteen suddenly went into trances. When they returned to their senses, blinking and thirsty, they recounted visions: angels, hellscapes, and dead Shaker leaders. That November, one of the girls, Anna Mariah Goff, saw Mother Ann herself. During two trances, one lasting five hours, Anna was led by Mother through a Shaker village, thick with flowers and trees. Mother petted a feathered angel, and urged repentance.

When the Shaker girls returned to their senses, blinking and thirsty, they recounted visions.

This marked the start of the Shaker's "Era of Manifestations." Soon, throughout the communities, brothers and sisters were whirling and collapsing, performing new songs, speaking in tongues. Under spiritual influence, Shaker women created colorful "gift drawings" in watercolors and inks (192 of these survive today). Some Shakers claimed they were possessed by Native American spirits; they translated native songs and messages into "primitive," unconjugated English. At Union Village, Kentucky, one boy was apparently entranced for over thirty-seven hours. Twice a year, Shaker villages conducted "feasts of the passover" on cleared mountaintops; they drank wine, marched, heard speeches, and danced. Villages got new "spiritual" names: Sabbathday Lake became "Chosen Land."

But the Era of Manifestations, thrilling as it was, also made Shaker elders nervous. They suspended public meetings in 1842 to protect themselves from outside scorn. Eventually, services grew more structured. The mountaintop feasts were discontinued. A set of ascetic 1845 laws set up protocols for the Sabbath (no meat, no fish) and reinforced the separation of the sexes. Winking was banned in meetings, as was perfume.

It's unlikely that these proscriptions had a direct effect on membership, but around the time of the Civil War, the Shaker population had begun to decline. After that, it was in freefall. In 1880, there were almost two thousand Shakers living in twenty-one villages. By 1900, there were less than one thousand. By 1936, there were ninety-two.

And by 1986, there were only eight, all living at Sabbathday Lake: five women and three men, including one named Wayne Smith, who had joined after graduating from high school. Twenty years later, that number was down to four: Frances, Arnold, June, and Wayne, the youngest. Around that time the *Boston Globe* ran a story on the village, headlined "The Last Ones Standing." The reporter's breathless description of Wayne read: "6-foot 3-inches, tanned and muscular from hours on a John Deere tractor, [with] the look of a strapping farm boy." Seven months after the article appeared, Wayne left the village. He'd been sneaking calls to the *Globe* reporter; soon he proposed to her. They were married as Methodists.

At two o'clock, Arnold waved from his porch, wiping his sweaty face with a rag. "Come in!" He ushered me into the Dwellinghouse. To my right, in the dining room, Sister June bent over a jigsaw puzzle. A cat skittered by. Arnold let me use his set of stairs as we climbed to an upper floor, and left me at a long table in an anteroom. Portraits of dead Shakers lined the walls, a row of witnesses.

Arnold Hadd, raised in Massachusetts, joined the Sabbathday Shakers in 1978, at the age of twenty-one. He arrived during a period of conflict with the only other extant Shaker community, in Canterbury, New Hampshire. In 1965, Canterbury had decided that no new Shakers would be accepted into either village. Why the ranks were closed isn't clear. Some think that the leaders were worried that "outsiders" would join and plunder Shaker assets (like land) once the older members had died. Others suspect the Shakers were wary of 1960s sex-and-drugs youth culture. Whatever the reason, the Canterbury Shakers said the sect would live on as history and principles. But the members at Sabbathday Lake refused to comply. They didn't believe that the Shakers were done. A bitter feud ensued as Sabbathday Lake continued to accept converts. Those aren't Shakers, said Canterbury, not if they joined after 1965. In the Shaker heyday, Canterbury had been the larger, more established of the two villages: but eventually, the last Canterburian passed, and Sabbathday Lake carried on.

"Surely, I have had a wonderful privilege. And it has been a dreary, horrible existence at the same time."

Arnold returned with tea in a turquoise mug that read *It Is What It Is*. He took a seat at the head of the table, leaned on his elbows, and waited to begin. Under that gaze I could barely keep my papers straight. I felt I was alone with something ancient, precious, odd. Arnold's very affect was superior. He was here keeping the faith, not me.

"Are there a few moments that stand out in your mind—peaks and valleys over the past twenty years?"

I expected some platitudes, like those I'd heard on the tour. But Arnold offered a different response. "Not too many high points at all," he said. "A lot of low points."

In his decades at the village, Arnold has served as a farmer, chef, nurse, craftsman, archivist, and press secretary. These days, it was all too much: "No matter how early you get up, you're still behind. We had ten people staying with us this weekend, and I'm the cook. Besides taking care of the barn, besides taking care of all the business, besides taking care of all the people, and besides taking care of everything else." Just that morning, he'd been "in the barn, trying to sort it all out in my mind, how I was going to get everything done. Thinking, I can't possibly do this. 'Don't anybody come down here and see me,' because if they do, that means they want something. And I just can't give anything more than I've got right now."

I got the sense that Arnold was overwhelmed, annoyed at me for taking his time. He also seemed eager to share his grievances.

All Shakers sinned, Arnold went on, and needed someone to confess to. "I mean, some people pay psychiatrists to do the same thing.... You hope you have a good elder to do that for you—some of our elders were not so gifted in those departments." He elaborated. "I think the ones that aren't good are the ones that forgot they're sinners too. We're all *right here*." He whacked the table with a palm.

How would he keep the village from extinction? "I knock on [people's] doors and say 'Hey, we've got a religious community. Go sell everything you have, come on up! And just spend the whole rest of your life giving everything you have to us.'" He shook his head. "That's all we got.

Arnold believed that the Shakers were creating a divine community on earth: "We're not prefiguring heaven—we're living it. This is it, *right now*." Yet it seemed that his life had not been heavenly. He struck me as befuddled by his situation. "Certainly, I have had a wonderful privilege and it has been a dreary, horrible existence all at the same time." Especially, I imagined, as caregiver to an older woman. Especially, I guessed, when he considered the end: confessing to himself, weathering winters alone in the cavernous house.

Arnold went on, speaking in fragments, raising his voice, correcting misconceptions. "It's not like people who live in obedience are just *mindless little puppets* doing the dictates of some sinister head. Not at all."

He continued. "A lot of people said that Mother Ann was the personal second appearance of Christ. But if you read the *Testimonies*, there's no indication of that at all."

I'd read in Stein's book that the *Testimonies* weren't trustworthy because they were recorded after Ann's death. The quotes and anecdotes were conveniently imagined to support contemporary Shaker beliefs. No, Arnold countered. "They remembered, and *then* they were recorded.... And those first believers never forgot a word."

Anyway, he said, Stephen Stein the historian was misguided. "It's a horrible book. It's a distortion of the whole history of the church. There's a ton of mistakes in it. 'The schism' [with Canterbury] is his big thing. That's almost a quarter of the book, the last twenty years. That's disproportionate and it really doesn't speak to what is."

Next he turned his attention to the Quakers. "The Quakers, at the time that the Shakers came out? They had *lost it.* All's they did was stand outside of public houses to see any member that went in to have a drink, then read them out of meeting the next week. It was a legalistic bunch of merchants."

He had harsh words for the "world's people"—those non-Shakers who came to Shaker meeting. "One of the do-gooders in our lives [is a] wealthy person who's never worked a day in their life." Arnold again slipped into impersonation. "'Oh, but if there are no Shakers, we'll still meet here,'" the do-gooder had insisted, trying to cheer Arnold up. "I said, *no, you won't.* There's no Shaker meeting without a Shaker." A bitter chuckle. "That's it, kid. Get it through your head."

Was Arnold nervous about being the last?

"If people come, that is great and glorious, because I believe this is the ultimate truth revealed to man. If man is not ready to accept the ultimate truth, then they're not ready...and all the more sad for them. But we have to live." It was our loss, not his. "People are not meant to be Shakers. It's always been a few."

But was there hope, I wanted to know. "I think it is a straight and narrow path," Arnold answered, "and the more you're on it, the more straight and narrow it becomes."

There were moments when he spoke rather beautifully. What will heaven look like when it is fully realized? "I don't know that it necessarily *has* to look like a Shaker community," he mused. "Light, all light, because that's what God is."

About to drive away from Sabbathday Lake, I thought to myself that the hardest sacrifice, if I were to become a Shaker, would be having to stay put: to suppress wanderlust, to keep one's body in one place. Even in such beauty—the sky that evening, tie-dyed lime green and pink; the clean-lined chairs; the proximity to water, teeming with lobsters; the vast, star-punctured sky—one might feel trapped. "Have you ever thought of leaving?" I asked Arnold.

"Have I ever thought of leaving? Of course! Who doesn't?"

On Sunday morning at 10 a.m., I joined thirty locals at Shaker meeting. Men sat on southside benches, women faced them from the north. We kept from making eye contact by adopting postures of prayer. In front, June sat reading her Bible. Arnold entered last.

The meeting began with June's bullfrog-thick voice: "Let us all praise the Lord." She read a psalm. Two female guests read: one from Deuteronomy, one from the gospel story of Jesus healing the bleeding woman. Arnold gave the theme of the meeting: "Receiving God's gifts." The visitors—the world's people—spoke their messages, recalling memories and giving thanks, making church with their voices. Arnold watched, evaluated. A woman and her husband recalled a friend,

described her earth-covered coffin. Some gave thanks for a chamber-music concert held the previous night. A bearded man slipped in and out of audibility, his holy message unclear. One woman described a ferry ride: good parking, tasty sandwiches. Arnold glared at this last frivolity.

When it was his turn to speak, he took up a preacher's posture, meeting eyes, sprinkling in jokes. Throughout the meeting, he sang Shaker songs—impromptu, *a cappella*, thematically connected to whatever had been shared. His mind was a veritable hymnal. Other visitors joined in; few knew all the verses.

Shakers had once danced and shouted and literally *shook*, sometimes for hours on end. But noise had long given way to silence. We sat primly in the neat square room. No crosses on the wall or stained glass, only a braided rug, a vase of pussy willows, a puffy bouquet of ballet-slipper flowers. When an hour of messages had passed, Arnold stood. "With the work of the meeting apparently finished…" He led a long prayer for the Shaker dead, then went to make lunch. While the rest of us ate nut-covered doughnuts and played with a spaniel that ran at our feet, he tied an apron over his waistcoat and prepared a midday meal for us, the guests in his home. When there were more visitors than Shakers, was this a Shaker meeting at all?

Arnold had encouraged me to send more questions, so I did. His response came on a Sunday night. When I read it, I knew that we wouldn't speak again.

Dear Friend:

Good to hear from you.

First of all let me just say that I realize we live in a very egalitarian age, but I truly find it offensive when you address Believers present and past by their first names and apostates with the prefix of "Brother." We have all given up all to follow Christ and all we ask is to be addressed as Brother or Sister and I would ask you to follow that protocol as well.

I have answered your questions within the confines of the body of your questions.

Also Harvest Festival is a glorious event, but I am out straight between the kitchen and the barn so visiting is out of the question.

Take care and God bless.

Peace,

b. Arnold

It seemed I'd made "a mistake in my communication." I'd left out some "Brothers" and "Sisters," and had used "Brother" for "Wayne"—who, apparently, was considered an apostate. I was taken aback by Arnold's anger. He seemed to think that by misusing titles I'd somehow challenged or ignored his authority. I moved on to read his answers to my questions.

Question: *What are your feelings about some of the contemporary "representations" of Shakerism: i.e. the Ken Burns documentary* [Hands to Work, Hearts to God, 1984] *and Hancock Shaker Village* [a museum and historical replica village in Massachusetts]*? How do those experiences illuminate or cloud an understanding of the faith?*

Answer: *Neither represents Shakerism only the Shakers represent Shakerism.*

Question: *What was it like for you to join the community in the middle of a controversy about membership? I know the other extant village had voted to close the ranks. What does membership mean to you?*

Answer: *You don't know that as it is a false statement. To be a Shaker is my continual aspiration.*

I asked about Wayne.

Answer: *God calls us all to a life, whatever that might be. It does not mean it is forever. If you were to look at the history of the Church you would realize that it is a very small percentage of those who enter and remain faithful unto death. Wayne still has con-*

Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village is located in Maine near New Gloucester to the east and Poland to the north (the namesake of Poland Springs water). According to the community's own history, the village was established in 1783 by a group of missionaries; in less than a year, two hundred people were living alongside the lake. Small and poor compared to other Shaker villages, Sabbathday Lake was known as "the least of Mother's children in the east."

MICHAEL FREEMAN / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

tact with us and there is no hard feeling at all. We did everything to make his leaving smooth as we always have with everyone.

Perhaps Arnold was an unreliable narrator, free to snip out some stories while preserving others. Could he really dismiss the historian, the documentarian, the Shakers who'd lived and spoken before? Perhaps he could. *He* was the historical arbiter. *He* was the theologian. *He* was the "lived experience." All the others were gone now and Arnold was alive. And if testimony was privileged above all other analysis, then he was the only source that mattered.

In his book *Radical Hope: Cultural Ethics in the Face of Devastation*, philosopher Jonathan Lear writes of a leader of the Crow people named Plenty Coups. After "the buffalo went away" and the Crow had been moved to a reservation, Plenty Coups claimed that "nothing happened." This perspective ("nothing happened") isn't just a sign of depression, or a figure of speech. Plenty Coups *really meant* to note the end of history, Lear contends, the end of a conception of the Crow "good life" outside of which nothing makes sense.

It is this "possibility of things ceasing to happen…the possibility of collapse" that Arnold lives with daily, the same possibility facing any ethnic and religious community whose numbers are dwindling, including cloistered Catholic orders. It creates an ethical question: How will one know how to live (and what to live for) when old standards for flourishing no longer apply? It's impossible to imagine; and so "anxiety," writes Lear, is "an appropriate response of people who are sensitive to the idea that they are living at the horizons of their world." This anxiety is something we all might experience, to some extent:

> We live at a time of a heightened sense that civilizations are themselves vulnerable. Events around the world—terrorist attacks, violent social upheavals, and even natural catastrophes—have left us with an uncanny sense of menace. We seem to be aware of a shared vulnerability that we cannot quite name.

Yet, Lear writes, we can still "hope for revival: for coming back to life in a form that is not yet intelligible." What Arnold does in the face of that recognition—cook meals, make hay, sing hymns—represents not just an homage to the past, but a courageous confronting of the future, "[A] daunting form of commitment," as Lear writes, "to a goodness in the world that transcends one's current ability to grasp what it is."

How will one know how to live (and what to live for) when old standards for flourishing no longer apply?

In 2007, the Shakers at Sabbathday Lake sold their rights to develop the property, and put the funds toward necessary repairs. A conservation easement now protects the land; it can only ever be used for sustainable farming and forestry. "We don't own any of this," Arnold insisted when we spoke. "None of this is ours. We're only stewards as they [past Shakers] were all stewards.… Leave it in a better condition than we found it for the next generation.… So that we can be the blessing that those who have gone before us have been." But a blessing to whom? A nature preserve isn't something the Shakers would ever have prayed for. This has been their sacred land for more than two hundred years.

"Unless you live the life," Arnold had told me, "you cannot truly understand it." And yet, one can at least understand the stakes. The Shakers are not a business, trying to sell chairs and soap. They are not advocates for gender equality or world peace. They are not a historical curiosity. The Shakers are a religious community. For them, the end means nothing less than the end of an idea of heaven.

A few months ago, the nonprofit Friends of the Shakers announced their annual retreat at Sabbathday Lake, an educational weekend of lectures, tours, music, and shared meals with the community they help support. The event program made reference to a "Brother Andrew," who'd be giving a lecture with Brother Arnold. A November advertisement on the Shaker Facebook page for "Shaker-made small batch soap and soy candles" was met with the encouraging comment, "Go Brother Andrew!" Had the Sabbathday Shakers welcomed a convert? A more recent post on the Village Facebook page seemed to confirm that, yes, a new brother had joined in January 2019.

Yet no official announcements, images, or reporting about Brother Andrew seem to exist. Neither Arnold nor the Friends of the Shakers replied to my request for comment. Perhaps Brother Andrew is still discerning. Perhaps the community is rejoicing privately for now, celebrating their increase together. Perhaps they don't want the "world's people" getting involved quite yet.

"It is not a matter of numbers," Arnold had told me. "It is a matter of faith."

KATHERINE LUCKY *is the managing editor of* Commonweal.

SANTIAGO RAMOS

'Trace of the Human'

'When Home Won't Let You Stay: Migration through Contemporary Art'

Today more than 68.5 million people are either refugees, asylum seekers, or internally displaced within their country of birth, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The U.N. also reports that one out of every seven people living in the world today can be classified as a migrant. In October, eight women and thirty-one men, all Vietnamese nationals, were found suffocated in a truck in England after having been smuggled across the Channel from Belgium. In November, the ACLU reported that since July 2017, 5,400 children—all fleeing violence and poverty in Central America—have been separated from their parents at the U.S.-Mexico border.

These are words and numbers. We glide over them quickly. Visual art, by contrast, grabs our attention, keeping us from racing by and forcing us to confront what we see. A new exhibit at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston, *When Home Won't Let You Stay: Migration through Contemporary Art* (its title comes from a poem by the Somali-British poet Warsan Shire), asks us to look beyond statistics to seek "a trace of the human." Though the migration crisis is one of the world's most pressing and intractable problems, curators Ruth Erickson and Eva Respini make clear that the exhibit is not meant to be read as a "political manifesto." Rather, the gathered works and their various mediums—video, photography, sculpture, installation—tackle the reality of migration and displacement in order to expose "the slippery and increasingly inadequate nature of our common language" around the experiences of migrants and refugees.

Richard Mosse, *Incoming* (still), 2014–17

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Camilo Ontiveros,
*Temporary Storage:
The Belongings of Juan
Manuel Montes*, 2017

Many of the works do so by incorporating everyday items left behind during perilous journeys. One of the most arresting is a twenty-eight-foot-long collage of forty-eight color photographs, titled *Artifacts found from California to Texas between 2013 and 2015*, by Richard Misrach and Guillermo Galindo. The two artists walked the borderlands taking pictures of the discarded objects the title so blandly references: a tube of toothpaste, an aqua-green pair of children's shoes, a pocket-sized New Testament. The owners of these disparate items were nowhere to be seen, but the images hinted at their presence—and spurred questions. How were the shoes lost? Why would someone leave behind a copy of the New Testament? Were these discarded intentionally or by accident? In haste, or in despair?

Other works actually bring such objects into the galleries, including them in installations that disclose the raw violence of forced migration. In Mexican artist Camilo Ontiveros's *Temporary Storage: The Belongings of Juan Manuel Montes* (2017), a bed and mattress, some framed photographs, a basketball, boxing gloves, a three-ring notebook, and several books are bound together with rope. Juan Manuel Montes, the California man who once owned them, had been stopped on the street by a Customs and Border Patrol agent one night in 2017; within three hours he was deported to Mexico. He was twenty-three at the time, and had been living in the United States since he was nine, a beneficiary of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. Montes was the first known DACA recipient to have suffered such a fate. My eyes were drawn to his bed. Supported by two metal sawhorses, it thrusts into the air—upended, just as Montes's life was. Another installation, French artist Kader Attia's *La Mer Morte* (The Dead Sea), is similar but arranges its objects even more provocatively. Denim jackets, sweaters, underwear, and jeans are strewn across a cement floor. They evoke the floating debris that remains when boats carrying African and Middle Eastern migrants capsize in the Mediterranean Sea.

According to the International Organization for Migration, about two thousand people died trying to cross the Mediterranean to Europe in 2018 alone. We've become accustomed to seeing images of people who've perished in attempting to start lives somewhere else. But one of the most powerful works in the exhibit is also one of its most hopeful. It's a sequence of photos by Dutch artist Rineke Dijkstra. She took fifteen pictures, one every year, of a Bosnian refugee named Almerisa, beginning with the latter's 1994 arrival in the Netherlands at the age of six. As the photos proceed, we see Almerisa develop into an adult, and then a mother. She's an image of a refugee not in crisis, but flourishing.

There's a difference, of course, between merely *seeing* refugees and adopting their perspectives. This is made palpable in Irish artist Richard Mosse's video installation, *Incoming*, projected across three large screens. Mosse uses a military-grade thermal-imaging camera to record migrants as they travel dangerous routes from the Middle East to Europe; we see them marching along rocky beaches, rounded up in camps, and transported in trucks. But we also see them praying to Jesus and the Virgin Mary, or bowing to face Mecca. Though the thermal imaging makes them look like ghosts, it's only a trick of the camera. Mosse's subjects aren't phantasms but human beings, fleeing violence and religious persecution. Thus, the limitation of the non-refugee, non-migrant gaze—incapable of fully registering the humanity of the people it records—is revealed. We see shadows, not people.

The show also draws attention to a less well-known cause of migration: anti-LGBT hatred. Colombian artist Carlos Motta's *The Crossing* uses video to tell nine distinct stories shown on six screens. The work unfolds as a series of interviews with LGBT migrants, now residents of the Netherlands. All are compelling, but two stand out. One is the account of Anwar, who weeps while recalling his escape from the Middle East—not only from the cruelty of government authorities, but also from his own family and friends. The other is the story of Butterfly, who found herself stranded without food or water on a motorless boat with fifty-seven other migrants from Syria in the Mediterranean. Butterfly used a vanity mirror to reflect the sunlight, thereby catching the attention of the Greek coast guard and saving the lives of all on board.

For all the pain of leaving home, and the struggle to establish a new one, many migrants and refugees still feel the tug of longing well after their resettlement. Few works in *When Home Won't Let You Stay* communicate this longing as viscerally as Korean artist Do Ho Suh's fabric sculptures. Using transparent polyester, stainless-steel wires, and metal rods, Suh crafts lifesize reproductions of different rooms from his childhood home. The rooms are cold, and entering one is like inhabiting a three-dimensional silhouette or a photographic negative—they're technically places, but they're not quite there. Yet Suh also adds warm and inviting minor details, like carefully constructed doorknobs and windowsills, making them feel like fabric playhouses. Clearly, fond memories of his former home still pull at him.

Everything in this exhibit poses the question, "What is a home?" Is it, as Pope Francis claimed in *Laudato si'*, something we hold in "common," a good to which everyone on Earth has a basic and universal right? If so, why does a growing percentage of the world's population lack a stable place to live? These questions demand an answer from anyone who *does* have a stable place to live. We have a moral obligation to respond—both personally and politically—to the human suffering these works so urgently lay bare.

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MATTHEW BOUDWAY

Dry Bones

'Heroes of the Fourth Turning'

Will Arbery's new play, *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*, which was staged this fall at Playwrights Horizon in New York, is itself quietly heroic, managing to do several hard things well. It not only succeeds in making the arguments of conservative Catholics intelligible and compelling to a mostly liberal, mostly secular New York audience; it also manages to demonstrate that the differences among conservative Catholics can be as interesting as the differences between them and everyone else. On a purely technical level, the play proves that it's still possible for political rhetoric to take the stage without sounding like an imitation of Aaron Sorkin. Though rhetoric is often treated as if it were beneath the dignity of good theater, it is no less natural than any other mode of speech. Rhetoric is just the idiom of persuasion, so only *bad* rhetoric deserves the playwright's scorn. In Arbery's play, the stakes of persuasion are, or appear to be, existential, and that by itself is a feat worth acknowledging.

But the hardest and most important thing *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* does is to put two contradictory realities on the same stage at the same time: the reality that Catholic Christianity is all about communion and redemptive suffering, along with the reality that much actual suffering, and especially physical pain, is incommunicable. Sure, we can talk about it, but we can't really share it. Pain, more than anything else, seems resistant to communion. Even when we can express it—and we often can't—it still isolates us. Just as each of us must die alone, each must suffer alone, no matter how many friends we have to comfort us as we do. Does our religion just obscure this second reality, or does it somehow answer it? Is it cure, palliative, or just placebo? That's one of the many questions this play asks and pointedly declines to answer.

The four friends of *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* have been brought back together in rural Wyoming for the installation of a new president at a small Catholic college. Three of them—Justin, Teresa, and Kevin—are recent graduates of the college and former students of Gina, the new president. The other, Emily, is Gina's daughter, who went elsewhere for college and career but has had to return home because of an unspecified illness that keeps her in bed most days. It is late at night (the night of August 19, 2017); a party has just ended at Justin's house; and the four friends have gathered in his backyard.

Now in his late thirties, Justin (Jeb Kreager) is older than the others. He attended the college after several years of military service and a failed marriage. His approach to Catholic counterculturalism is *reculer pour mieux sauter*: the Benedict Option as tactical retreat. Despite the election of Donald Trump, Justin is sure that all the real power belongs to the secular liberals who are destroying the things he holds dear—the family, the faith, a capacity for sacrifice. The prudent course in such circumstances is to keep one's head down and wait for our decadent culture to destroy itself. As he explains, "the only way to survive is to block them out, to focus on the Lord. Try to outlive them. Bake bread, make wine, work the earth, shelter wanderers, and survive." Remote Wyoming is as good a place as any to do these things; big cities are all off-limits, "hubs of LGBT activity" and other disorders. Justin now teaches horsemanship at the college and lives alone. At the beginning of the play we see him pick up a rifle and shoot a deer that wanders by his yard, then carry its carcass back to his porch and begin to dress it. As the play proceeds, he keeps returning to a blood stain on the porch that no one else seems to notice. Compared to his three friends, he is a model of composure, but there's an unmistakable glint of anxiety in everything he says.

Kevin (John Zdrojeski) is in many ways Justin's opposite: immature and emotionally needy, sex-starved and writhing with self-contempt. He is guzzling whisky throughout the play, so one is never quite sure how much of his extravagant self-abasement reflects a real spiritual crisis and how much is just the booze. Kevin works for a Catholic textbook publisher and seems to be addicted to online pornography—he says all he does is "come and cry." He thinks maybe he should become a priest, but he also thinks that maybe all his problems would be solved by having a girlfriend. His appetites seem to be not just incompatible with his religion but incommensurate with it, as if the two things existed on entirely different levels of his psyche, each with its own exorbitant demands. Kevin plays the puppy for pity and for laughs, but we know why Justin thinks he "smell[s] like the devil."

Then there's Teresa (Zoë Winters), who talks like the devil and has all the best lines. She lives in Brooklyn and writes blog posts for a Breitbartish website (her hero is Steve Bannon). Her rapid-fire monologues are impressive and alarming, brimming with historical references and spiked with ideological zeal. Teresa is preparing herself for civil war, and clearly relishes the prospect. She and her cobelligerents will be "heroes of the fourth turning," a final period of crisis in a historical

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cycle that repeats itself every eighty years. The liberals, having overplayed their hand, will be vanquished by a new generation of conservatives with no scruples about civility. Civility is for chumps, or "soy boys" like Kevin. Robert Frost once defined a liberal as someone afraid to take his own side in an argument. Teresa defines conservatives, *real* conservatives, as people not only unafraid to take their own side but ready and eager to annihilate the enemy. She is a piece of work, no doubt about it, but is she a real person? No one—not her friends, not the playwright—seems to know.

Finally, there's Emily (Julia McDermott), sanctified by suffering. Or so everyone else would like to assume. Like her hero Flannery O'Connor, Emily knows that long nights of the soul can have a lot to do with the body; and her illness gives her an authority to which the others instinctively defer, even when they disagree with her. Her conservative Catholicism, if that's what it is, is not like Teresa's or Justin's. Theirs is solid and proudly impenetrable, hers fragile and porous to the experiences of the undevout. Emily has worked for a prolife organization that helps pregnant women in distress, but she also has a friend who works at a Planned Parenthood clinic, and she insists that her friend is, despite her moral error, a good person who believes she's helping women—not, as Teresa would have it, the moral equivalent of a Nazi guard at a concentration camp. It is not only Emily's illness but also her gentleness that wrong-foots Teresa. She can accuse Kevin of being a soy boy, but she can only accuse Emily of being too kind for her own good.

Late in the play Gina (Michele Pawk) arrives to take Emily home, but not before receiving tribute from her former students. They ask her to read part of the speech she gave at her installation as the college's new president, and she is happy to oblige. To judge from the fragment we hear, it isn't much of a speech: tediously figurative, ideologically complacent, a bit pompous. In fact, this passage of ceremonial rhetoric turns out to be the weakest and dullest rhetoric in the whole play, and one assumes this was intentional. A podium may now be the last place to look for real eloquence.

Soon Kevin, falling-down drunk, is asking Gina questions she isn't prepared to answer—questions about the value of the worldview he drank in at her college—and then Teresa is challenging Gina for dismissing Trump and his advisers as charlatans. This intergenerational argument between a Millennial firebrand who thinks our current president is chemotherapy for a sick country and a mellowed-out Goldwater Girl who went to confession immediately after voting for Trump is more than the narcissism of small differences. As Teresa at least understands, there is a real question here about whether prolife politics can ever be detached from the politics of race—not about whether the ethical argument against abortion entails racism (the answer to that is obviously no) but about whether the prolife cause, as a political movement, can get anywhere except as part of a larger fight for "Western Civilization" and whether that concept can be understood in nonracial terms. Teresa thinks it can't. Her conservatism is about white people sticking up for themselves before it's too late, answering the tribalism of identity politics with their own tribalism. As she puts it:

> You call us racist, we'll call you racist. You call us white, we'll call you black. You call us Nazis, we'll call you abortionists and eugenicists. You call us ignorant Christians, we'll call you spineless hedonistic soulless bloviating bloodbags. But you stop doing that, and give this thing space and time to work itself out, we'll stop too.

Gina finds this repellent, and appears genuinely surprised to hear one of her protégés talking this way. She is certainly right to be repelled, but does she really have a right to be surprised? According to Teresa, her own politics are just the logical extension of Gina's; Gina just doesn't have the guts to accept responsibility for it. If you've hosted a campaign event for Pat Buchanan in your home, as Gina once did, then you can't clutch your pearls at the mention of Steve Bannon.

At the end of the play, everyone has left the yard except for Justin and Emily. It's clear from the start that there's some kind of bond between these two, a friendship at least, maybe something more. Justin is obviously eager to help Emily however he can, and she seems to prefer his help to everyone else's. The tenderness between them is one of the few hints of something conspicuously missing from most of the dialogue in this play: grace. Because these are alpha Catholics, the word "grace" gets used often enough, but there's remarkably little sign of the stuff in all the showing off and putting down and digging in our heroes do. They're supposed to be outside in open country—they keep mentioning the sky, the stars, an impending eclipse—but this pious conclave feels oddly claustrophobic. At moments when the dialogue is pitching into another round of malice or despair, Justin's backyard seems like a chamber in hell, right down to an unearthly shrieking that keeps erupting from somewhere just offstage. Justin says the sound is from his broken generator. One of the few flaws in this play is that the audience is expected to believe this explanation—or at least to accept that the people on stage believe it. Spoiler alert: it's not the generator. In its last moments, *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* veers into *Twilight Zone* territory, where it doesn't belong. Whatever is gained in symbolism or metaphysical depth is lost in plausibility. A play this theologically serious and psychologically devastating doesn't need a badly rigged *diabolus ex machina* to drive it's point home. But you can't ruin two hours of brilliant naturalism with two minutes of supernatural guff.

Despite this false step near the end, Arbery's very last step lands right where it should, here in the ordinary world where the greatest terrors are all too natural. Saint Emily, meek and mild, has something to tell Justin about suffering that leaves him flat on his back. Her pain, she explains, is not what he thinks it is, and it does not do what he thinks it does. It destroys before it redeems—if it even does redeem. It is not, as he imagines, spiritually beautiful; it is hideously ugly. He does not, and cannot, know it, and his compassion is really a form of self-deception, worthless to her and damaging to him.

In one sense, Emily's fury seems to come out of nowhere. It's so out of keeping with her manner in the rest of the play, and what does it have to do with Trump or the Benedict Option? Nothing and everything. The exquisitely articulated ideological constructs in the rest of the play all pretend to be in the service of a religion whose God was tortured to death. Even the most secular New York theatergoers know this about Christianity, but if they didn't, they would never learn it from all the brilliant dialogue of the Catholics intellectuals in this play. It goes unsaid not because it goes without saying, but because Catholicism here has wandered about as far as it can from the Gospel without becoming totally unrecognizable. What remains are its bones, which might or might not be good enough to prop up Western Civilization—Teresa's real religion—but are of no comfort whatever to Emily. Her agony calls her religion's bluff. It kills all ideology and sentimentalism on contact. What, if anything, does that leave?

Very early in the play, Kevin asks Teresa why Catholics have to love the Virgin Mary, because, frankly, he finds it impossible to love her, no matter how hard he tries. In response, Teresa launches into a lecture about the "scandal of particularity." This, she says, is what liberals, with their universalism, can't tolerate about Christianity—that it's about God intervening in particular places at particular times, in one way rather than another, choosing a particular people, then choosing one woman to be the mother of the one Son of God. This is all very edifying as far as it goes. But it does not reach Emily, and that is where the real scandal of particularity is in this play: in the particular suffering that none of Emily's friends seems to know what to do with. Here, even their best, most sympathetic rhetoric is a rattling of dry bones.

MATTHEW BOUDWAY *is senior editor of* Commonweal.

RAND RICHARDS COOPER

The Life You Lead

'The Irishman'

Three years ago in these pages I interviewed Martin Scorsese about his adaptation of the Shūsaku Endō novel *Silence*. At the end of our conversation, I asked the director what was next for him. Scorsese sighed. He was exhausted from making the film, he confessed, and wasn't sure he was up to any more. Then he offered a sly grin. Robert De Niro had been whispering in his ear, he said. "De Niro and I, we've had this project in mind about an old hit man—a true story. It takes place in the 1960s. It's about the price you pay for a life that you lead, and a sense of good and evil."

And so comes *The Irishman*, produced by Netflix with a reported budget of $160 million. Scorsese and screenwriter Steven Zaillian—the two collaborated on 2002's *Gangs of New York*—have based the film on the 2004 nonfiction book *I Heard You Paint Houses*, presenting the life of Frank Sheeran, a high-ranking Teamster official known for his ties to the mob. As an old man, Sheeran (who died in 2003) boasted that, alongside his Teamster duties, he had served as a hit man, adept—in a gruesome metaphor that formed the book's title—at "painting house walls."

The Irishman follows the careers of two men, Sheeran and longtime Teamster chief Jimmy Hoffa, from the 1940s to the 2000s. (Chronicling this sweep of time is made possible through the interventions of VFX technology—CGI touchups that make actors look younger, digitally "de-aging" them.) De Niro's Frank is a World War II vet, truck driver, and petty thief who, through a chance meeting, becomes a trusted henchman for Philly mob boss Russell Bufalino (Joe Pesci). With Bufalino mentoring

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him, Frank gets a union job, rises in the Teamster hierarchy, and ultimately lands as confidant and friend to Hoffa (Al Pacino, in what incredibly is his first-ever appearance in a Scorsese movie). Scorsese and his lifelong editor Thelma Schoonmaker steer deftly among different time frames; a narrative spine is provided by a 1975 road trip Sheeran and Bufalino are making, with their wives, from Philly to Detroit to attend a wedding—and also to visit Hoffa. With De Niro narrating in voiceover, the movie ranges back over Frank's career and family life, and forward to his eighties, alone and ailing in a nursing home.

The Irishman is long, but its three-and-a-half hours fairly fly by, a tribute to the effectiveness with which Scorsese and Zaillian sympathetically engage the experiences of multiple characters over many decades. In addition to the aging of the actors, superb period-piece details and a background tapestry of news stories all create a near-perfect blending of personal story and social chronicle, working together to draw forth the reality of time's passage, with it mixed mercies and cruelties. A movie that draws you in this fully can go on a long time; it feels less like an entertainment than like life itself.

Throughout much of the film, De Niro wears a default grimace, as if assailed by a bad odor. That odor could be Sheeran's discomfort at his own actions, which culminate in a crass and violent betrayal. Good mob lieutenant that he is, his is not to question, but to act; loyalty, rather than ethical deliberation, is his stock in trade. Does Frank's complicity bother him? Hard to tell. *The Irishman* reminds us how effective De Niro—who has played voluble roles aplenty in his career—can be when he's not saying very much. Frank possesses the quiet person's advantage, by which simplicity can pass for depth. (When Frank does open up, what comes out is hilarious; in one scene, he muses about why he prefers to be buried in a crypt, since "you're dead, yes, but it's not as final" as being buried in the ground.)

While De Niro's character sits at the center of the film, Pacino's Hoffa is the tragic figure, and the more compelling one. As various conflicts with the mob mount in intensity, Hoffa's insistence on defending his own personal fiefdom ("This is *my* union!" he snarls) eventually transforms mere turf protection into something more, something like a commitment to a principle that—amid a life of moral chaos—might even be worth dying for. Addressing a union rally, Hoffa whips the Teamsters into a frenzy with a rousing refrain of "when anything gets done in this country, a *truck* got it there!" The scene captures brilliantly the point at which demagoguery and passionate political commitment blur together. In recent years one might be forgiven for feeling that Pacino has jumped the shark as an actor, playing roles with a gravelly voiced, shouting braggadocio that approaches caricature. But the role of Hoffa allows him to take these energies and plow them back into nuance, delivering a mesmerizing performance that lets us see once again the actor who is fine-tuned enough to play Shakespeare.

The Irishman contains any number of Scorsesean hallmarks, continuities of style and subject that trace to the very beginning of the director's career. There's his penchant for popular music, the movie bracketed by The Five Satins singing the doo-wop classic, "In the Still of the Night." There's the terrific period-piece look of Frank's 1960s and '70s heyday: "mod" kitchen furniture; boatlike Cadillacs; the glossy glam of a Miami luxury hotel; the opulent hairdos of Frank's and Russell's wives. And, of course, there is violence. That's been present ever since a short notice in the *Times* of 1965 cited *Bring on the Dancing Girls*—in a showing of NYU student films—and praised "the savage, dramatic study of young urban wastrels, written and directed by 22-year-old Martin Scorsese." That apprentice film led two years later to *Who's That Knocking at My Door?*, which studied young male violence expressed through bluff bluster, bellicose gamesmanship, and harsh ambivalence toward women. Those same energies shaped the gangster codes of *Mean Streets* (1973), which, along with *Taxi Driver*, completed the nascent view of society and human nature—and of film as an art form—that made Scorsese's name.

Gangster violence is certainly given its due in *The Irishman*—several killings feature a Peckinpaugh-like explosive spouting of blood—and yet it is subsumed within other, mellower forces, cued by Frank's voiceover and reflecting Scorsese's own implicit retrospection, the essentially grateful ruminations of a man in the gloaming of a magnificent career. Though far more blood is spilled, *The Irishman* contains almost none of the raw ferocity of *Taxi Driver*, and the film's look and feel accordingly occupies a far gentler register. In our interview, Scorsese mentioned growing up reading the *Daily News*, and commented, interestingly, that its aesthetic "goes through all my movies. That black-and-white tabloid, that's *Taxi Driver*." *The Irishman* lets in something more like *LIFE Magazine*. Not a noirish glare, but rather a mellow goldenness illuminates the wise guys assembled here. De Niro, Pesci, Pacino, Harvey Keitel: the geriatric status of this pantheon of twentieth-century American gangster actors, and of Scorsese himself, lends an inescapable meta-dimension to the film's preoccupation with time and aging, and accounts for its pleasurably mellow cast. In a way, *The Irishman* is Scorsese's version of those comedies, like *Tough Guys* and *Grumpy Old Men*, in which we celebrate old codgers for their old codgerness. The film's long coda—when you think *The Irishman* is over, there's still a half-hour left—ties the perspective of time to themes of sin and forgiveness. As the elderly Frank is tended to by a young nursing-home aide, he tells some of his Hoffa stories, only to realize that she has no idea who Jimmy Hoffa was. The realization frames a question: Does time assist forgiveness, or merely forgetting? Twice Frank is counseled by a young priest who digs into the ex-hit man's moral self. Is he sorry for the things he

Robert De Niro in *The Irishman*

has done? the priest asks; does he feel remorse? Not really, Frank answers. He seems less haunted by his violent past than baffled. "What kind of man makes a phone call like that?" he mumbles, referring to a call he made years earlier to comfort the wife of someone he himself murdered. But as a response to the priest's question, this amounts to little more than a shrug; what Scorsese manages to convey is not so much moral ambiguity or confusion as collapse—a kind of moral dissolution before the primal facts of time and mortality.

Religion in *The Irishman*—that is to say, American immigrant Catholicism—provides a steady stream of rituals (baptisms, weddings, absolutions, funerals) that offer solace and help form identity. But Catholicism's ability to extend truly substantial moral scrutiny or reckoning, even through the agency of a spiritually alert priest, is next to nil. This sharp disjunction between ritual piousness and personal pathology has been a staple of the mob genre in film and TV—it was taken to the next level, in *The Sopranos*, by the recourse to therapy—and Scorsese deploys it here to ambiguous effect. Frank is not so much a moral conundrum or paradox or enigma as he is a moral non-entity.

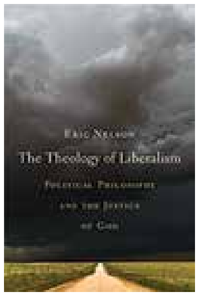
In our interview, Scorsese cited a line from Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*: "God is not a torturer; He wants us to be merciful with ourselves." The director pointed to the last, tormented scene in his 1980 masterpiece *Raging Bull*—the scene in which De Niro's Jake La Motta lacerates himself with a guttural and despairing cry of "I'm not an animal!"—as portraying our raw human need for the kind of mercy he discerns in Bresson. But with Frank, there is no torment; and some may wonder, how exactly are we supposed to respond to the memoirs of a hit man? With the warm fuzzies? If, as Scorsese said three years ago, his new film is about "a sense of good and evil" and "the price you pay for a life that you lead," what really is the price Frank has paid? Yes, he's estranged from a daughter who grew up repulsed by her father's easy recourse to violence. But all in all, he seems as happy as any eighty-year-old American.

Three years ago, with reference to *Silence*, Scorsese said that both the Endo novel and the film he made of it addressed a question: "If you strip away everything, what really matters?" The answer, the director said, was faith, and how that faith animates your life. "Stripping away everything ultimately comes down to God and you," he remarked back then. The film he made was accordingly severe. Rife with extended still camera shots, visually carefully composed, *Silence* is an outlier in Scorsese's filmography. There was a stillness at the heart of the movie; it's isolated, quietly meditative, and spiritually earnest. These aren't typical qualities for a director whose movies brim with raucous energies, jousting sarcasm, and a lot of noise. *The Irishman* returns the director to his familiar cinematic beat.

Assessing the long list of Martin Scorsese's accomplishments, I'd rank *The Irishman* high. But it raises more questions than it answers. Is it possible for a portrayal of violence to be elegiac? In the end, you can't really separate the reality of Frank Sheeran from the genre in which it's deployed, or from the record of triumphs this now seventy-eight-year-old director has produced in that genre for half a century. There's a kind of hit-man's-greatest-hits quality to the film's parade of murders, and Scorsese repeatedly freezes the action to list, via subtitles, the future date on which this or that character will meet his untimely end, and how it will happen (shot twice in the head, garroted in a cab, and so on). These garish destinies register as more merry than horrifying, and I like to think that Scorsese would be warmed by our mordantly imagining some character in the movie walking away from a funeral and saying, "Well, at least he died doing what he loved most."

Rawls & Theodicy

SAMUEL MOYN



THE THEOLOGY OF LIBERALISM
Political Philosophy and the Justice of God

ERIC NELSON
Harvard University Press, $29.95, 232 pp.

According to a possibly apocryphal story, one crusty political theorist wondered to another whom they should hire next, having lived through two successive trends in their field. One wave had brought the history of political thought from the Greeks through World War II to a new level. The other had made an academic industry of John Rawls, the great American philosopher whose *A Theory of Justice* (1971) did more than any other book to define the terms of political thought in our time. “It’s obvious what comes next,” his friend replied. “The history of Rawls!”

And, in fact, two young Harvard political theorists have come out simultaneously with two of the best treatments imaginable of the context and meaning of Rawls’s epoch-making book. But the two could not be more different. *In the Shadow of Justice*, the exciting new leftish history by Katrina Forrester, suggests that, for all his abstraction, Rawls was offering a metaphysical gloss on the program of the right wing of the British Labour party of the 1950s, when it was seeking an increasingly market-friendly vision of socialism, one that would eventually devolve into neoliberalism. For her right-leaning colleague Eric Nelson, by contrast, Rawls is a failed early-modern theologian, whose legacy is to leave liberals without a good reason to believe that justice requires even modest redistribution.

Nelson is astonishingly gifted and hard-working. At a strikingly young age—he is only in his early forties—he has now written four equally impressive books. They are remarkable in their erudition. With enviable mastery of the classical and Jewish traditions and awesome knowledge of early-modern political theory, Nelson has new things to say about every topic he touches, even when his arguments are not totally convincing. Never until *The Theology of Liberalism*, however, has he let himself cross the bridge from history to present-day debates.

“The left has no concept of forgiveness of sins,” tweeted conservative Christian Erick Erickson in August during the kerfluffle around the *New York Times* “1619 Project” on the legacy of American slavery. This is basically Nelson’s argument too. But he pursues it brilliantly at a rather higher level of discourse.

Nelson opens his book by placing Rawls’s recently discovered Princeton University senior thesis, written in 1942, in the long Augustinian tradition of Christianity that denied that sinful humans could save themselves. For Augustine and his followers, Pelagianism—named after a late-antique theologian who was condemned as a heretic by the Catholic Church—overstated the extent to which human beings can earn their salvation. Such a belief verged on an ideology of self-redemption of individual sinners or of humanity itself that (as Rawls put it at age twenty) “rendered the Cross of Christ to no effect.” For Rawls, at the time a committed Christian who planned a career in the Episcopal priesthood before World War II service in the Pacific caused him to lose his faith, it followed that “no man can claim good deeds as his own.” To contend otherwise inflated human capacity and courted sacrilegious idolatry of humanity itself.

Nelson intuits that this Augustinian response to Pelagianism lurked in Rawls’s defense of fair distributional justice long after he had moved on to secular philosophy. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls remarked that “no one deserves” their social ascendancy and the natural gifts—intelligence or industriousness—with which they achieved it. The fact that one person was endowed with them and another not was “morally arbitrary.” A theory of justice aiming at fairness rather than fortune would reject any sense that people deserved their class position. Some redistribution from the rich to the rest was therefore just.

What Nelson does with this parallel between Rawls’s Christian senior thesis and his mature theory of redistribution is more contentious. Demonstrating that most founders of the liberal tradition were Pelagians, he insists that it is difficult to reconcile Rawls’s rejection of moral arbitrariness with the politics he hoped to advance.

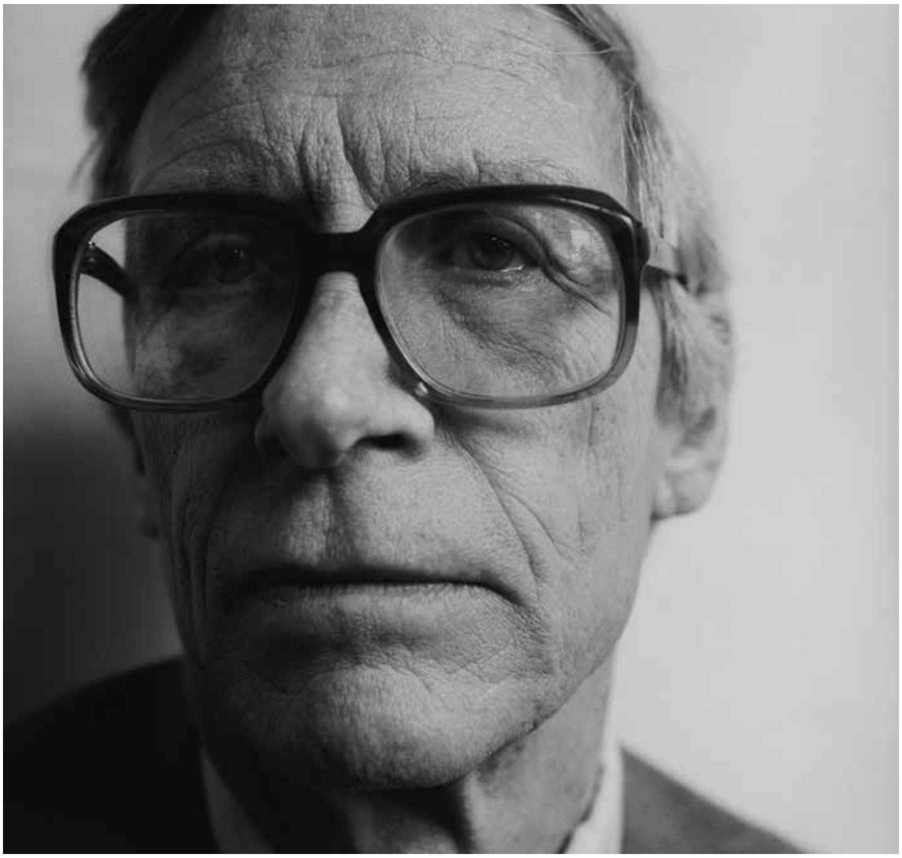
“Liberalism,” writes Nelson, “began as a theodicy.” By this he means that for the major liberal thinkers in the early-modern period, the attempt to justify the ways of God to men almost always included the belief that God is unfailingly good. It is their own autonomy that leads humans, if they choose not to conform to God's plan, to introduce evil into the world on their own. What made for the correlation of Pelagianism with liberalism is that the theological defense of human freedom—including freedom to err—implied that individuals should be allowed politically to seek perfection on their own, without the interference of states or sects. Liberalism was born out of the insistence that, since agents were free enough to save themselves, they had to be left alone enough to have a chance to do it.

Observing that early liberals embraced the very theology that Rawls rejected, Nelson thinks Rawls's followers are left with a big problem. Liberalism originated in the Pelagian heresy that refuses to saddle human beings with original sin, or to make them utterly dependent on the divine, but instead grants them autonomy, dignity, and (at least, potential) self-made perfection. How, then, can Rawls and his followers reject Pelagianism without also rejecting liberalism?

Nelson's answer: they can't. Either you adopt the Augustinian line that, while no one earns their gifts and talents, any seemingly unfair distribution is part of God's mysterious design, whose meaning is to be revealed only at the end of time; or you adopt the Pelagian view that you do earn them—that greater wealth really might reflect greater merit. You can't have it both ways, as Rawls and his followers want.

After suggesting that Rawls's Augustinian case for redistribution is incoherent, Nelson spends the rest of his book arguing that Pelagians, who believe in the autonomy of human beings, will also find it difficult to make a case for more egalitarian distribution—at least as a matter of obligatory justice, as opposed to optional public policy (a possibility Nelson graciously acknowledges).

The gist of his argument is that nobody knows for sure that the distribution of gifts and talents is unjust. Denying that alternative worlds were better, he observes, is what early-modern Pelagians spent their time doing, perhaps most famously when arch-Pelagian G. W. Leibniz coined the term "theodicy." It is illicit, Leibniz claimed, to infer from the apparent unfairness of the created world that God didn't do the best he could with the imperfect human materials he was working with. If you think our reality is not already optimal, you haven't considered what God had to deal with in making it. What if doing better on one front might have worsened the world in other ways?



John Rawls in 1990

STEVE PYKE / GETTY IMAGES

What the Lisbon earthquake was to Leibnizians—a scandal for the simpleminded that did not necessarily disprove God's goodness and justice—neoliberalism is to Nelson. How, he wonders, do progressive advocates of redistribution know we are not already in the fairest of all possible worlds? The mere fact of unequal distribution—whether of wealth itself or of the talent it rewards—hardly proves that a better state of affairs is possible, or that the pursuit of a more equitable distribution would not lead to a worse outcome.

But Nelson's argument could be turned against him: if no one can know for sure that we are not already in the fairest of all possible worlds, neither can anyone know that we are. Leibniz himself conceded that no conclusive proof is available that the way the world has worked out is best. "Theodicy," Nelson says when resting his own case, "could be neither demonstrated nor refuted." If that is so, however, then it is really a matter of determining whether to force on egalitarians the obligation to *prove conclusively* that—in the old slogan of the alter-globalization movement—another world is possible. Why not instead place the burden on those who conclude that existing inequality is the best available scenario?

In his responses to Leibniz, in any case, Voltaire never took it upon himself to prove that his foe had rationalized horror, the better to preserve the belief in God's goodness in a flawed world. Rather, Voltaire simply ridiculed him. However difficult if might be to show that it's false, the notion that our history of crimes and misfortunes has led to the best imaginable society is simply too incredible for us to allow it to get in the way of a zeal for just reform. Nelson surely wouldn't have required of abolitionists that they prove to dominant skeptics that a better world without chattel slavery was possible before they resolved to achieve it. Why is the case of fair distribution any different in the alarmingly unequal situation of the present?

But there is also a deeper quandary about the way that Nelson brings old theology to bear on contemporary philosophy. He insists that a lot follows from restoring their lost unity, as he does so intrepidly in his book.

Nelson is right, of course, about the influence of theology on the assumptions of Western thought, and even on Rawls himself. Nelson convincingly says that in the early-modern period, theology and philosophy were not even distinct enterprises. Amos Funkenstein, one of the many great students of early-modern thought to have taken up similar issues before Nelson's book, called the results "secular theology." For that matter, a host of authors, most recently Ian Hunter, have explored the way that the ongoing contest between the heirs of Augustine and Pelagius structured the origins of modern political thought. Besides reconstructing the history in an illuminating and original way, however, Nelson also places Rawls in the theological tradition better than anyone so far. For example, he produces an arresting piece of evidence from Rawls's library, showing that even after *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls could express skepticism about a claim in a book he was reading by writing "Pelagian-ism" in the margin.

But it takes quite a bit more work to insist on the continuing relevance of theology to political theory. "Liberal political philosophers," Nelson writes, "have been unwittingly taking up positions in the theodicy debate." Yet, as Nelson himself acknowledges, it does not follow from the fact that many liberal theorists centuries ago operated in a Pelagian framework that all have done so—they have not—or that they must go on doing so forever. Beyond this, the liberal argument for redistribution, from the premises that nobody deserves their starting points in life and that it would be possible to create a fairer society, has to be proved or disproved by our best secular reasoning.

That contemporary liberal political philosophy is reminiscent of Christian thinking about God's justice, and was even started by someone with commitments in that old discussion, is surely fascinating as a matter of intellectual history. But if the theological framework were dispositive, Nelson would not have had to spend so many pages of this book mounting a purely secular critique of the liberal argument for redistribution. Nor does the fact that Nelson's own argument might have roots in theological positions that were first staked out in the theodicy debate necessarily make it any stronger.

I don't mean to suggest that the history of philosophy is irrelevant to its present and future, or that Christianity in particular has not deeply informed our world of thought. *The Theology of Liberalism* is a great and rewarding book, for insisting otherwise on both counts. But it does not establish that a secular politics demanding more fairness for a society of moral equals is not a just cause—let alone that egalitarian liberalism is or has to be theological.

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Somewhere in Between

MICHEAL O'SIADHAIL

Seamus Heaney's *100 Poems* is a welcome and delightful selection, the first to feature work from all twelve of his original collections. Though Heaney had plans for such a volume, it's poignant that these poems were chosen by his wife, Marie, his daughter, Catherine, and his sons, Michael and Christopher. The brief prologue, called "a family note," informs us that "the task was approached with a lifetime's memories," that it is inevitably "imbued with personal recollections," and also that "many readers will come to this book with their own memories and associations."

I am one of those readers. My late wife, Bríd, died in June 2013, and Seamus, who was supremely thoughtful and gracious as always, cut short an interview he was recording to come to the church to offer his sympathies. Some ten weeks later he was gone from us. As his wife Marie entered a packed Donnybrook church for Seamus's funeral Mass, she caught my eye and I read her lips saying, "We're in the same boat now." I do indeed come with memories and associations.

Apart from two items, one a passage from his play *The Cure of Troy*, the hundred poems of the title are all from Heaney's twelve published collections and are presented in the order in which they first appeared, book by book. They are fairly evenly distributed across his career, varying from three or four to thirteen poems per book. Seamus's family, taking full advantage of privileged knowledge of the poet's own favorites, has assembled a wonderful selection that combines his most popular poems with lesser-known poems that help display the full range of his art and vision. It is touching to see so many love poems to Marie. Among them are "Twice Shy," "Scaffolding," "Wedding Day," "The Otter," "The Skunk," "The Underground," and "A Pillowed Head." Also included are the lovely "A Hazel Stick for Catherine" and "A Kite for Michael and Christopher." Following Seamus's own skill in choosing meticulously the opening and closing poem of a collection, this selection starts with what is perhaps the poet's best known poem, "Digging," with its final lines:

100 POEMS

SEAMUS HEANEY
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,
$25, 192 pp.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

And the book concludes with the last lines of "In Time," dedicated to his granddaughter Síofra: "But for now we foot it lightly / In time, silently."

Richard Rankin Russell, in his masterly *Seamus Heaney: An Introduction*, the only book that examines his entire work, describes how extraordinarily well Heaney's books sold internationally and how "Heaney received all the major awards for poets and writers in his time and in the last twenty years of his life was recognized with many lifetime awards." Six years after Heaney's death, it is appropriate to try to see the bigger picture, to understand the enduring appeal of his work and to ask where it fits in the literary tradition. Of course, there was what Russell calls Heaney's "hectic travel schedule and generosity toward others." There were his immense charm, his presence, his moral integrity, and exemplary decency as a husband and father. In addition, Seamus, as a skilled manager of his own career, contributed to a new image of the Irish poet that contrasted with the more bohemian pub-oriented culture of many of the preceding generation. Then there were the four substantial prose collections, as well as two plays, five books of translations, and a collection of interviews titled *Stepping Stones*. All this besides holding several academic posts, including professorships at Oxford and Harvard. Yet Heaney's legacy and his continued popularity as a lyric poet now rest on the twelve volumes from which this selection is chosen. What are some of the factors that give his work a quality that remains so alluring?

In discussing the first of Heaney's collections, *The Death of a Naturalist*, Russell speaks of how "Heaney's in-betweenness is manifested." He is referring to "how the more ahistorical poems about childhood and manual crafts are counterbalanced by deeply historical poems such as those about the Great Famine of 1845." While this is one genuine example of Heaney's in-betweenness, I think Russell touches here on the hermeneutical key to understanding both the poet's appeal and his place in the larger tradition. Yeats famously said that "out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry." But the betwixt-and-betweenness that pervades Heaney's life and work is less a quarrel than a deliberate embracing of ambiguities. In his early essay "Mossbawn," he cites "the mixture of Scots and Irish and English etymologies" and writes about how this "side of the country was redolent of the histories of its owners." Heaney's awareness of such mixtures and his hovering in-between them is a fundamental characteristic of his work.

One cause of his being so widely admired is that his poetry draws back from the excesses and fractured quality of literary modernism and instead chooses an amiable accessibility. He is comprehensible, quotable, grounded in the quotidian, and he often offers practical wisdom. The bulk of the poems in this selection have four-, three-, or six-line stanzas; some, particularly the earlier ones, have either full or slanted rhyme. There are at least ten sonnets with varying degrees of strict rhyme schemes. Heaney moved skillfully between the formal and the free, reassuring his readers that this is poetry as they have always thought of it, and yet it is at the same time completely contemporary.

Another expression of in-betweenness is Heaney's shifting between engaging personal reminiscence and his more Yeatsean side—his public questioning of his poetic vocation against the background of the cruel realities of Northern Irish politics, where he shifts between abhorrence of the violence and a sense of guilt at his lack of committed involvement.

In a world of accelerating change, Heaney was chronicling in beautifully wrought verse the characters, rituals, and accoutrements of his rural upbringing. Russell quotes him as saying in an interview, "What with thatch and well water and horse-drawn vehicles and horse ploughs and so on, when I look back on it, there's a strong sense that it belonged to another age, really." All through his work he excavates his memory with painstaking accuracy to recover every sensuous yet realistic detail of his rural background. In the poem "Sunlight" we see an exquisite example of his superb gift for catching in his gaze the lovely minutiae:

And here is love
like a tinsmith's scoop
sunk past its gleam
in the meal-bin.

He had such an uncanny eye, and indeed ear, for the defining particulars. Another instance, this one from "A Drink of Water": "The pump's whooping cough, the bucket's clatter / And slow diminuendo as it filled."

Heaney also gives us consoling resonances of traditional motifs. In "Digging" there is the resonance of the traditional choice offered by a father between a spade and a book or pen, signaling the need to decide whether to work at home on the land or to study assiduously at school. In "The Given Note," we have an echo of the tale of the origin of "Port na bPúcaí" (The Tune of the Fairies), which travellers or fisherman who stayed overnight on Inis Mhic Fhaolain in the Blasket Islands (off the coast of County Kerry) heard coming from the mists. In the poem "Song," the concluding line—"The music of what happens"—is a translation of a phrase in Irish attributed to Fionn mac Cumhaill.

The thematically more public poems deal with politics, both historical and contemporary. This selection includes an early sonnet titled "Requiem for the Croppies," one of a few poems dealing with the 1798 rising in Ireland, written in the voice of one who died:

Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon.
The hillside blushed, soaked in our broken wave.
They buried us without shroud or coffin
And in August the barley grew out of the grave.

Here are also some of Heaney's finest poems about the menacing political atmosphere of Northern Ireland, such as "A Constable Calls," "Casualty," "Two Lorries," or "Whatever You Say Say Nothing." In the tension between his political loyalties and his artistic commitment, the personal and the public can merge. In "Punishment" he describes himself as the "artful voyeur" who knows he would have cast "the stones of silence." In the section from "Station Island" included here the poet speaks to a dead victim: "Forgive the way I have lived indifferent— / Forgive my timid circumspect involvement."

There is yet another betweenness in Seamus Heaney's use of language. His voice melds the rich expansive language of Wordsworth, whom he so admired, with the curter Anglo-Saxon feel of Hopkins. We hear the sweeping Wordsworthian tone in "Into Arcadia" from "Sonnets from Hellas," which opens with: "It was opulence and amen on the mountain road." And closes with: "Subsisting beyond eclogue and translation."

There are ample examples throughout this selection of Heaney's Latinate timbre: "fructified like an aquarium," "superannuated pageantry" (from "Personal Helicon" and "A Sofa in the Forties," respectively). But this timbre is offset by his delight in Anglo-Saxon compound nouns and adjectives such as "oak-bone," "brain-firkin," "frond-lipped," "brine-stung," "glitter-drizzle," "sud-luscious," "snotty-guttery"—examples all from poems in this selection. Clearly, some of these adjectives have Latin origins, but the composite usage is in the Hopkins vein. This older Germanic use of language is further seen in his periphrastic formulae for the sea in "Glanmore Sonnets VII": "Of eel-road, seal-road, keel-road, whale-road."

This retrieval and renewal of both traditions has an immense attraction for readers. But there is a third important strand to Seamus Heaney's language. There is the influence of Patrick Kavanagh. Russell quotes Heaney as saying that Kavanagh's book *The*

Seamus Heaney in Cordoba, 2008

Great Hunger "gave me this terrific breakthrough from English literature into homeground." This was a permission to reflect his own background not only in lifestyle but also in language, in dialect words such as "loaden" (load), "japped" (splashed), "glit" (slimy mud), "glar" (soft mud), "grunt" (perch), "dailigone" (twilight, evening). For this reason and others, Patrick Kavanagh is the poet whom admirers of Seamus Heaney need to read. Both their imaginations were colored by an older rural Ireland. Heaney wrote two essays about Kavanagh. In the first of these, "From Monaghan to the Grand Canal," he dismissed the wonderful final phase of Kavanagh's work. In the second, "A Placeless Heaven: Another Look at Kavanagh," he graciously and humbly writes, "So I would wish to revise a sentence which I wrote ten years ago. I said then that when [Kavanagh] had consumed the roughage of his Monaghan experience, he ate his heart out." He goes on to quote Yeats on how "the soul recovers radical innocence" and how Kavanagh had "cleared a space" for that. That space-clearing was to occur, although in a more ambiguous fashion, in Heaney's own work.

Russell writes of Heaney's "agnosticism, that shades even towards atheism at times." Heaney, speaking about his childhood Catholicism, said that "part of the mission of the young graduate in my time was to secularize yourself," and that "the doctrinal observance, the practicing Catholicism, it just went." Yet gestures toward what might be beyond the ethics of *The Haw Lantern* or *The Republic of Conscience* begin to appear in his later work. His well-known phrase "crediting marvels" signals this. And still the ambivalence is there, as though he resists the quality that Kavanagh called "airborne." In "Postscript" he writes, "Big soft buffetings come at the car sideways / And catch the heart off guard and blow it open." Yet it feels in "The Gravel Walks" as if he is almost holding out against that liftoff: "So walk on air against your better judgement / Establishing yourself somewhere in between."

In his first Kavanagh essay, Heaney writes, "Matters of audience and tradition are important in discussing Kavanagh. How do we 'place' him?" Now is a good time to ask how we should place Seamus Heaney. The answer might be "somewhere in between." He is a poet of transition. In the keen-eyed accurate descriptions of his rural past, Heaney is the chronicler of a passing traditional Ireland, a hoarder of both personal and communal memories. Though he traveled widely and had such an international reputation, in much of his work his center of gravity is still Ireland. He was always faithful and deeply attached to his roots and throughout *Station Island*, where he evokes the Lough Derg pilgrimage, all his Dantean shades are Irish. In a wider sense he was always a conserver, and, particularly in second-order work such as his versions of *Sweeney Astray*, *Beowulf*, or *Aeneid Book VI*, he encourages a savoring of the tradition. This hallowing of literary heritage was a counter to the amnesia and shallowness of some of his contemporaries.

On the other hand, in his rejection of violence, in transcending a sectarian divide, in his interest in Eastern European poetry, in his finding new ways to integrate the local and the global, Heaney points forward to a mutually dependent and polyglot world, a new geopolitical reality where all our futures are interwoven and where all human tragedies and achievements are shared. His love of nature prepares us for a global struggle for survival on our damaged planet. In his willingness to credit marvels, in his cultivation of the imagination and a world beyond sheer rationality, Heaney's work suggests a fresh seeking for faith. He is truly the poet of transition.

It's not that I can't imagine still
That slight untoward rupture and world-
tilt
As a wind freshened and the anchor
weighed.

MICHEAL O'SIADHAIL*'s most recent book of poetry is* The Five Quintets *(Baylor University Press).*

Christmas Critics

Melody S. Gee

I was twelve when I first watched *The Joy Luck Club* on a library VHS. Amy Tan's novel (precursor to the film) had been released four years earlier, when I was in third grade and too young to notice. *Joy Luck* tells the story of four Chinese mothers and their American daughters, how they inherit each other's fortunes and sorrows across generations and continents. Alone one evening in front of the television while my parents worked at our family's restaurant, I saw on screen, for the first time, plots and characters that told my story of cultural negotiation, language barriers, and filial piety.

Later, my mom watched *Joy Luck* with me. I thought she would revel in seeing Chinese characters in an American movie, but she remained mostly unmoved—except during one dramatic scene of betrayal and escape, when she scoffed: *Why should you buy Amy Tan's books to learn these things? I could have told you these stories for free.* Still, she praised the author for "getting it right." She may have meant the history (Chinese women's subjugation, famine, immigration) or trauma (war, family separation) or Tan's portrayal of assimilation's gifts and wounds.

This year, I picked up Tan's ***Where the Past Begins*** **(Ecco, $28.99, 368 pp.)**. Her second book of nonfiction is part memoir (fans will understand my thrill at learning what was and wasn't autobiographical in *Joy Luck*) and part meditation on writing. To research the book, Tan describes digging into bins of childhood memorabilia; she finds her parents' death certificates, a photograph of her teenage brother laid out in his coffin, letters, abandoned novels, and reams of sketches. She tests her memories against this evidence, revealing gaps, errors, and outright lies she now must reconcile to her story. *Where the Past Begins* contains interludes from source texts, namely early journal entries and letters Tan wrote to her mother from college (Tan often interjects to remark on the mystery of

COURTESY OF AMY TAN

Amy Tan, pictured with her family in 1959 who her past self was). The book is deeply metatextual. One chapter is comprised of a series of emails with Tan's editor, Daniel Halpern, about writing the book. Another chapter begins, "I am the author of this novel," then enrolls readers in a master class on narrative structure, voice, and character. *Where the Past Begins* affirms that the past is not a set of memories but a living companion, that the present is not just the moment at hand but a spectral current flowing with history, childhoods, and ghosts.

Before becoming a fan of Amy Tan's novels, the only Chinese character I had encountered in a book was Shirley Temple Wong in *The Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson*. That novel, set in the year of my mom's birth, details a story similar to hers: the heartbreaks and refusals of a young girl recently arrived in America from China. By contrast, the protagonist in Lisa Ko's 2017 National Book Award Finalist ***The Leavers*** **(Algonquin Books, $15.95, 352 pp.)** is a first-generation American like me. The book follows Deming Guo: born in Brooklyn, sent to live with his grandfather in Fuzhou until age six, and then reunited with his mother back in New York. Deming and his mother grow close, then drift apart as Deming becomes both adolescent and American. In one scene, Deming tells his mother he's been given a denigrating nickname at school. He thinks it's funny, his ticket to acceptance; she demands Deming quash the name-calling. Their impasse is momentary, but carries a weight of linguistic misunderstanding I can identify with: my CDs thrown in the trash over untranslatable song lyrics, friends banned from our house because of misheard teenage banter.

When Deming is twelve, his mother disappears, altering not just the direction of his life but his identity as her son, as American *and* Chinese. Spending his teenage years in a homogenous white community in upstate New York, Deming is vulnerable and isolated, escaping into jazz and Jimi Hendrix.

The Leavers explores not only the immigrant experience but also transracial adoption, revealing the fragility of being white adoptive parents to a child of color. With equal tenderness and anger, we see the jealousy a child's biology and birth family can elicit in an adoptive family, whose love is desperate to surmount—and thereby erase—race, language, and grief. As we watch Deming grapple with his life's upending, his birth mother narrates her own story of loss and desperation, addressing it to her son. Readers of Amy Tan will recognize the child haunted by a parent's immigration story—a self that is both his mother and everything his mother has lost.

As a first-generation American, I've done many things my parents never could. Becoming a teacher (or just working outside the family restaurant) was one. The last seven years of my teaching career were spent with developmental writers at my city's community college, and my final recommendation, Michelle Kuo's memoir ***Reading with Patrick*** **(Random House, $17, 336 pp.)**, brings the assimilation story into adulthood. Like my very first encounter with Amy Tan, I was surprised and gratified to see part of myself reflected in Kuo's story of becoming a teacher.

Kuo recounts her Teach for America assignment in Helena, Arkansas, a segregated, declining town in the Mississippi Delta. Amid her lyrical descriptions of Helena's kudzu and dust, and her loving renderings of her students' spark and wit, we meet Patrick, an eighth-grader in her class. Already fifteen and mostly raising himself, Patrick charms Kuo with his kindness and curiosity. Kuo eventually leaves Helena, only to return years later when she learns Patrick is in jail for a terrible crime. In his cell, he and Kuo start reading together, transforming each other.

Structured around her reading with Patrick, Kuo's book examines a series of fraught relationships between herself, her parents, and her work. She is caught between her parents' enormous sacrifices and equally large expectations for her life, and her deepening loyalty to a dysfunctional alternative school in a dying town sustained by families left behind in the Great Migration. In trying to reconcile her obligations and desires, Kuo exposes her own motivations with striking vulnerability: "My parents had come from a country nobody had heard of that I didn't know much about. And so I had turned—it was becoming obvious now—to the black tradition as a surrogate, as a way to fill in the absence of my own history and claim an American past." *Reading with Patrick* is Kuo's multifarious American assimilation story: away from her parents and into America, as a stranger into Helena, and ultimately into her vocation. Like all powerful assimilation stories, it hinges on flawed, limited, transcendent love.

MELODY S. GEE *is a freelance writer and editor, and the author of* The Dead in Daylight *and* Each Crumbling House. *She lives in St. Louis, Missouri, with her husband and daughters.*

Griffin Oleynick

It was one of my more memorable Airbnb reservations—a small apartment located under the eaves of a barn, part of a working horse farm in western Massachusetts. A friend and I were staying during an academic conference held at a nearby college.

As soon as we pulled into the driveway, we saw Charm and Ranger prancing in the barn. They were therapy horses, their handler proudly informed us, former racers who'd been abused and neglected by previous owners. Since rehabilitated (though still arthritic), they were now working with emotionally vulnerable adults, many of whom were former victims of abuse themselves. After feeding the pair a few handfuls of sunflower seeds, we watched Charm "hug" a young woman, who

Handsome One, age thirty-three, was surrendered to a sanctuary when he retired from racing.

beamed as the horse sidled up beside her and enfolded her gently within his long neck. In that instant, we watched the animal become something more than just a horse: he was an individual with a story, a creature with a face and a name.

A similar conviction—that all animals are individuals, endowed with grace and dignity—informs the mesmerizing black-and-white photographs in Isa Leshko's ***Allowed to Grow Old: Portraits of Elderly Animals from Farm Sanctuaries*** **(University of Chicago Press, $40, 126 pp.)**. The project, which took Leshko nine years to complete, began by chance. The photographer was visiting her sister in rural New Jersey in 2008, taking a respite from caring for her elderly mother, who was then dying of cancer. Wandering outside to a field where some horses were grazing, she was immediately taken with Petey, a thirty-four-year-old horse who had "deep hollows above his cataract-laden eyes" and a coarse coat, and walked with a "pronounced sway." She grabbed her camera and started shooting. Only later, upon reflection, did Leshko realize that she'd finally found a way to process the grief and anxiety surrounding her mother's illness—aging and death, Petey taught her, have a beauty all their own.

Allowed to Grow Old tracks Leshko's systematic exploration of the strange beauty revealed by these leftovers of the animal world, all residents of hospice-like "farm sanctuaries" scattered throughout the United States. She depicts her subjects—not just horses, but also chickens, turkeys, dogs, cows, pigs, and goats, mostly rescued from factory farms—in moments of vulnerability. To gain their trust, Leshko spent several days sitting quietly with each animal, first clearing her mind via meditation, then bending her knees and scrambling through grass, mud, and hay so that she could meet each animal at eye level. Shot from this posture of humility, using only natural light, Leshko's photos reveal subtle, ennobling details—the downy white neck feathers of Ash, an elderly turkey napping with his head upside down, or the flaring wet nostrils of Violet, a potbellied pig with partially paralyzed hind legs.

Animal photography, as Leshko explains, has long been associated with hunting. (This is true even at the level of vocabulary; both require "shooting.") In photography's early days, hunters used cameras to record their quarries and conquests. But Leshko is after something altogether different, and more spiritual. Her photographs of elderly animals serve not as documents of death, as theorists like Susan Sontag or Roland Barthes would have it, but instead as images of life, and ultimately, of gift.

Hunting, and specifically the porous boundary between the human and animal worlds, also lies at the center of *Redoubt*, an ensemble project by video artist Matthew Barney that opened at the Yale University Art Gallery last spring. Its innovatively designed catalogue, ***Matthew Barney: Redoubt* (Yale University Press, $50, 368 pp.)**, has the look and feel of a field guide. One of the contemporary art world's most provocative figures, Barney is known for producing over-the-top films, sculptures, and drawings that intertwine wide-ranging subjects—human sexuality, geography, pop culture, and consumerism—with his own ever-evolving personal mythology.

Barney has always created self-enclosed aesthetic worlds, and as its title implies, *Redoubt* is no exception. Taking his native Idaho—specifically the wolf-inhabited, wildfire-prone wilderness of the majestic Sawtooth range—as his point of departure, Barney builds his project around a two-hour film, shot on location during a particularly harsh, snowy winter. There's no spoken dialogue; instead, Barney is interested in exploring how other kinds of language—music, dance, the motions of celestial bodies, and the rhythms of the natural world—can help break us out of our mental fortresses, freeing us to contemplate and commune with something larger. *Redoubt* also includes monumental sculptures made from burned tree trunks and brass alloys, along with copper engravings that have been deformed via an innovative "electroplating" process.

The "plot" of *Redoubt* (such as it is) is an adaptation of one of the most well-known myths from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In that text, the hunter Actaeon wanders through a forest and stumbles upon the goddess Diana as she bathes with a group of nymphs. He observes her from behind a veil, but she catches him and, enraged, transforms him into a stag, who is doomed to be tracked and killed by his own dogs. In Barney's version, Diana is a camouflaged sharp-shooter wielding a rifle with a high-powered scope, Actaeon an employee of the National Park service who takes time from his surveying duties to engrave her image on copper plates. Over the course of six distinct "hunts," the engraver tracks Diana as she and her nymphs track a wolf, who stands as a symbol of both the savage violence and rugged beauty of rural Idaho's vast expanses.

If this sounds somewhat confusing, that's because it is—Barney has a knack for entangling esoteric strands of meaning without weaving them into an overarching interpretive framework. *Redoubt* is in some sense an allegory of contemporary America (we the people are lost in a political wilderness, trapped in our private redoubts—real or virtual—as forest fires burn all around). But the exhibit isn't really supposed to make sense in any straightforward way. Rather, it serves as a subtle invitation to *let go* of our need to know and understand. Barney taps into something our national discourse could certainly use more of—namely, mysticism, the capacity to wonder at what we don't yet know.

GRIFFIN OLEYNICK *is an assistant editor at* Commonweal.

Regina Munch

"Peace on earth, good will toward men," we sing this Christmas season, echoing the words of the heavenly host in announcing Jesus' birth to the shepherds.

This year I read a lot of fiction set in war zones, where that message of God's mercy shining on the world can be especially hard to hear. Although they confirm the arbitrariness, ugliness, and distorting violence of war, these stories most of all speak to the very *need* for stories, and how, through the communal nature of storytelling, humanity is restored to the wounded.

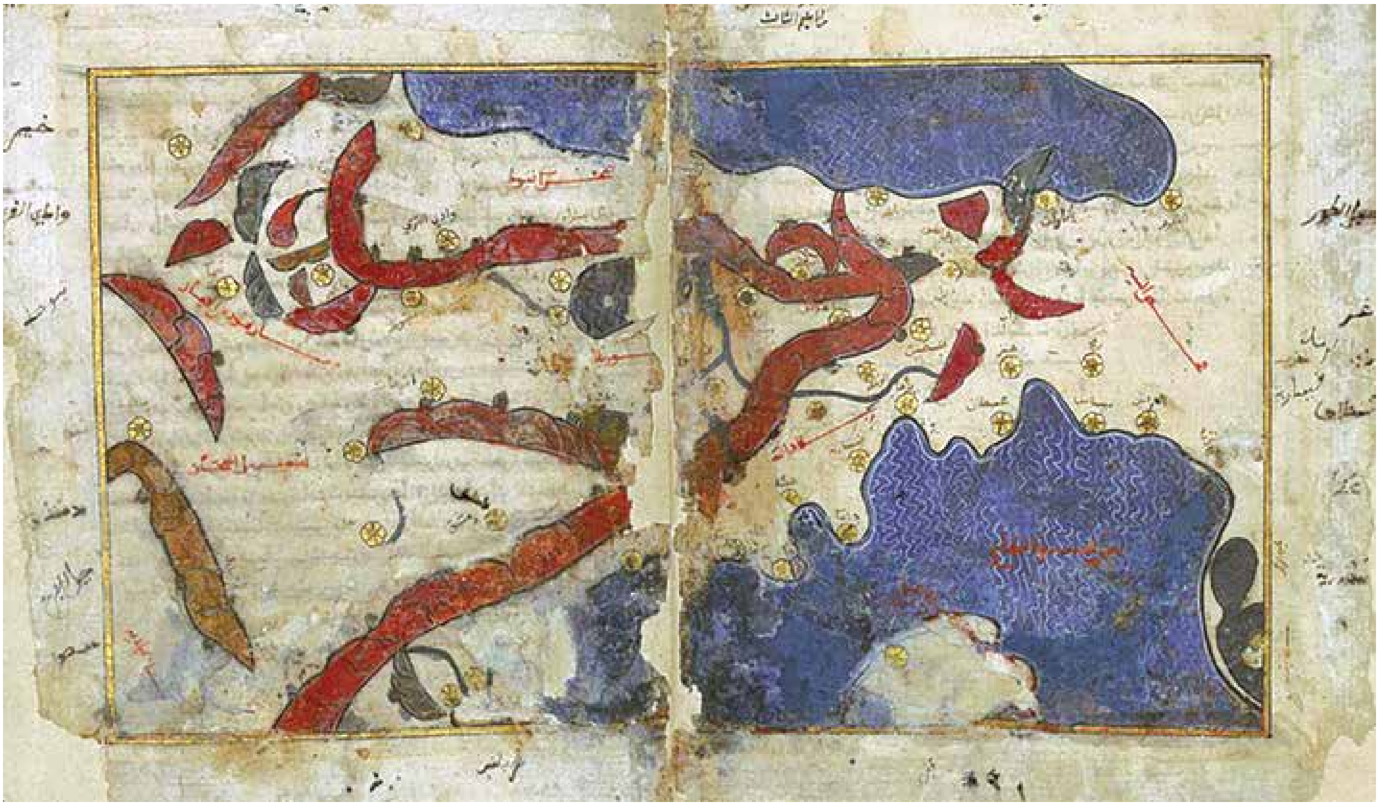
Zeyn Joukhadar's ***The Map of Salt and Stars* (Atria Books, $16.99, 384 pp.)** tells the story of Nour, a Syrian-American girl whose mother moves their family from Manhattan back to Homs after the death of Nour's father. The year is 2011, the civil war has just begun, and in the first fighting a bomb destroys their house. Soon the family is fleeing across the Middle East and North Africa in search of safety. There is danger all along the way: threats of physical and sexual violence, the risk of drowning in a leaky boat or suffocating in the back of a truck heading to some country where no one seems to want them.

Nour's narrative is interspersed with snippets of a fantastical bedtime tale she remembers her father telling her: that of Rawiya, a girl living in the twelfth century who apprentices herself to the real-life mapmaker Muhammad al-Idrisi. Together Rawiya and al-Idrisi chart the Mediterranean coast and outwit their nemeses, from rival armies to a monstrous bird of prey. Retelling this story to herself throughout the flight from Syria, Nour hopes that somehow her father will hear it and be comforted as well.

Joukhadar's writing is lovely and lyrical, and for Nour she has found a voice that is almost mythical. Searching for kindness and belonging, Nour and her family hope for a land to call home in a region disfigured by forces outside their control. All they have, Nour learns, are their stories—the things that tie them to the past, and to each other.

The first scene in Steven Galloway's ***The Cellist of Sarajevo* (Riverhead, $21, 256 pp.)** is based on a real event. During the siege of Sarajevo in the mid-1990s, twenty-two people were killed by a bomb as they waited outside a bakery. Trying to restore some humanity to a city under attack, the cellist Vedran Smailović risked sniper fire to play, in full tuxedo, on the street where the bomb went off, every day for twenty-two days.

Galloway uses this event to follow three fictional characters through the "mortar-pocked, sniper-infested" city as they try not only to survive, but



Muhammad al-Idrisi's map of Syria, Palestine, Sinai

also to hang onto the people they were before the war. Kenan is a father and husband who must make the dangerous journey to get water for his family; Dragan is an older man who wonders whether his happy memories of Sarajevo before the war are anything more than an illusion. Perhaps most compelling is Arrow, a university student who became a sniper at the outset of the conflict and has become more accustomed to killing than she thought possible. She gives herself the name Arrow to shield the memory of her old self from the tool of war she has become: "Using her real name would make her no different from the men she kills. It would be a death greater than the end of her life." She is tasked with protecting the cellist—and in doing so, denying a victory to those "trying to kill the city" by stamping out anything that might bring peace to its inhabitants. Galloway's writing is sparse and no-nonsense, as stark as the hollowed-out buildings and empty streets he describes. He writes in the present tense, seeming to erase the characters' sense of past and future just as war does. When a sniper chooses to fire on someone, "[t]hose left are robbed of not only a fellow citizen but the memory of what it was to be alive in a time before men on the hills shot at you while you tried to cross the street."

War destroys community and isolates individuals in their fear. The cellist, on the other hand, acts as "an instrument of deliverance," drawing people from their isolation to an experience of communal consolation and beauty. The people whom Galloway depicts have been beaten down by years of war, but they try individually and together to retain what makes them human. (After I finished *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, I learned that Galloway had been fired from his position at the University of British Columbia after several allegations of sexual harassment. He has admitted to having an affair with a student, but denies the harassment charges.)

Phil Klay's ***Redeployment* (Penguin Books, $16, 304 pp.)**, a collection of intensely researched short stories about the Iraq War, has been compared to Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* for its ability to show the psychological and existential destruction done to human souls in war. *Redeployment*'s twelve narrators are active-duty and veterans, front-line soldiers and desk grunts, morticians, chaplains, and others who try not to feel broken in circumstances that threaten to break them.

Klay, a veteran of the Iraq War himself, feels the urgency of telling stories. In a *New York Times* op-ed, he recounts the time a well-meaning civilian told him, "I could never imagine what you've been through." But something is missing if this is how we think of the military, or of war. Klay writes, "If we fetishize trauma as incommunicable then survivors are trapped—unable to feel truly known by their nonmilitary friends and family." A soldier's experience might be hard to hear or understand, Klay admits, but "what if I want you to?"

Redeployment can read like a catalog of despair: the constant risk of brutal death in the form of IEDs and sniper fire; self-hatred and suicide; cover-ups

TABULA ROGERIANA

of abuse by soldiers; the desire to mutilate, torture, or kill civilians and combatants that creeps into soldiers' psyches. Klay's stories are not pretty, and each takes a slightly different approach to the horror of violence.

I'll focus on one. "Prayer in the Furnace" is told from the perspective of a Catholic chaplain trying to "spiritually minister to men who are still being assaulted" by their everyday experiences, sinking further into anger, hopelessness, and hatred. He writes in his journal, "I see mostly normal men, trying to do good, beaten down by horror, by their inability to quell their own rages…their desire to be tougher, and therefore crueler, than their circumstance."

Where is God in all of this? "If God is real," the chaplain thinks, the promise of heaven isn't enough. "There must be some consolation on earth as well. Some grace. Some evidence of mercy." He and the other soldiers await this consolation, wondering if it will come. In a homily, the chaplain tells the congregation that as Christians, "We are part of a long tradition of suffering. We can let it isolate us if we want, but we must realize that isolation is a lie."

Perhaps it is that lie that God meant to dispel by entering the world. With Jesus' birth we are written into a story of love and salvation, made whole again in community with one another, and with him.

REGINA MUNCH *is an assistant editor at* Commonweal.

David Mills

As anyone who uses Facebook knows, we too quickly explain, meaning explain away, the world and each other. It's not so simple a place, and we are not such simple beings. I recommend three books that push back against that temptation.

The first is Ryan J. Marr's ***To Be Perfect Is to Have Changed Often*** **(Fortress Academic, $96, 234 pp.)** a study of John Henry Newman's thinking about the church from his conversion in 1845 to 1877, when he wrote a new preface to his book on Anglicanism, which he had written as an Anglican trying to remain one. Marr runs the National Institute for Newman Studies in Pittsburgh, and I should mention that he's a friend.

Newman started, as a convert, as a "moderate ultramontanist." He emphasized infallibility and papal authority, partly in reaction to his former Anglicanism. The appeal to authority seemed to solve Anglicanism's intrinsic problems. And it did. Just not so easily as he thought.

He mostly left out the laity and the theologians, Marr argues. His life as a Catholic, not least his experience of ecclesiastical abuses, and the vexing persistence of superstition in the church, opened him to a more "decentralized" idea of authority. The church's three offices—prophetical, sacerdotal, and regal—support and correct each other, and together undermine any simple appeal to authority. He increasingly pushed back against those (pretty much everyone in charge) who held some form of the ultramontanist view he had held before he realized it didn't work.

Marr's book is a revised dissertation, with all the advantages and disadvantages of such a project. (You want references? He's got billions! You want a question worked out nine levels beyond normal human interest? Got that too!) But the detail helps when the subject is someone like Newman, and when the issues at stake are ones we're still dealing with today.

Original Prin **(Biblioasis, $10.39, 224 pp.)** is the latest novel from the Canadian writer Randy Boyagoda. In Canada, he's best known as a novelist and academic, as principal of St. Michael's College. Here, he's best known for a respectful but not uncritical biography of Richard John Neuhaus. This darkly satirical novel tells the story of a Catholic academic who eventually decides to become a suicide bomber. He has been diagnosed with cancer; his college is closing and being sold to developers; things aren't working out as he had hoped, or expected.

The novel (a section of which appeared in the March 23, 2018, issue of *Commonweal*) is funny, sometimes very funny, in a light, dry, observational way. On a trip to the zoo with his family, Prin loads his "aging Volvo with a trunk full of emergency supplies—road flares, iPad chargers, unread *New Yorkers*." The old name of Holy Family College was deemed "too Catholic," and the school was renamed the "University of the Family Universal." But the funniest parts are long set pieces in which people reveal themselves to be who they are, and who they are is regrettable.

Boyagoda satirizes academics, Catholics, Catholicism, Islamic terrorism, family life, male insecurities, and a raft of other subjects. Prin, the child of Sri Lankan parents, feels his life isn't what it should be, but the real problem is that he knows he's not what *he* should be. The reader can connect. At least I did.

Born in 1892 in a very out-of-the-way town in what is now Belarus, Doba-Mera Medvedeva began writing in 1939 while still living in the Soviet Union. She wrote the two notebooks published as ***Daughter of the Shtetl*** **(Academic Studies Press, $21.95, 210 pp.)** for her children. The book is full of details about life both inside and outside the shtetl. "I am not very old, but I have seen much grief," Medvedeva writes in the beginning, "and almost every day my life has been filled with so many interesting events and thoughts and feelings that I often go over them in my mind."

She has decided opinions. Of a relative who exploited her family, she writes: "He was like everybody who lived and studied at someone else's expense. People like that were deadbeats and slackers." Much of the book describes her awful relatives. Her life rarely works out well. Faced with an impossible choice to stay with family that didn't want her or with a fiancé's father who didn't want her either, she writes, "The way things turned out, staying is bad and living is sad." Of course, they were Jewish, and life in Russia and then the U.S.S.R. was never going to be easy for them. Jews, she remarks of the chaos of the Russian civil war, "were always the victim of disorder."

Daughter of the Shtetl includes an introduction by Medvedeva's grandson and a short study of the memoir itself, along with many very helpful footnotes. The *Jewish Review of Books* has published a story from the book online, for readers who want a sample.

DAVID MILLS *edits the site Hour of Our Death.*

Isabella Simon

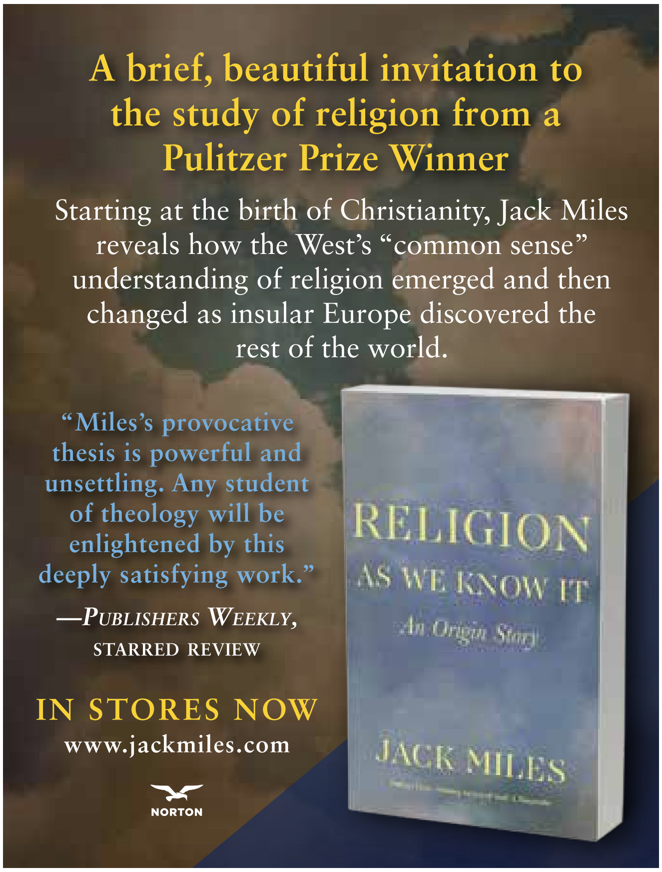
I moved to New York City this summer, and despite growing up in another big city (Chicago), my new home has sometimes felt isolating and exhausting. It's difficult to navigate a place when all the people who know me best live too far away to share a meal or an embrace. Fleeing climate change–induced natural disasters, political unrest, or civil war, or simply seeking new economic opportunities, immigrants and refugees face journeys far more challenging than my own. Yet they too encounter homesickness, and struggle to establish their identities in unfamiliar, sometimes unwelcoming territory.

Such is the case for Ghayath Almadhoun, a Palestinian poet who escaped the Syrian civil war and settled in Stockholm in 2008. In his collection ***Adrenalin*** **(Action Books, $18, 96 pp.)**, Almadhoun is a wolf separated from his pack, longing for Damascus. Anguished, hopeful, violent, and darkly ironic by turns, Almadhoun deftly traverses the landscape of civil war ("a moral earthquake striking the world") and personal heartache ("my heart that could bear five barbaric wars stutters when it says your name"). Tempering the difficulty of his themes is the beauty and surprising black humor of his language. *Adrenalin* is Almadhoun's first collection to be translated into English, and translator Catherine Cobham captures his emotional depth, elegantly spare verses, and fluid transitions between lines, paragraphs, and time periods. Yes, there is the war. There is massacre, "a dead metaphor that is eating my friends, eating them without salt." But just as immediately, there is the poet who loves, and is saved by loving.

Yaa Gyasi's novel ***Homegoing* (Vintage, $16.95, 320 pp.)** describes a different kind of migration, from Ghana to the United States via a slave ship. Esi and her descendents live in the United States; Effia, the sister she never met, continues her lineage in Africa. *Homegoing* comprises fourteen short stories, each of which focuses on a different member of Esi and Effia's family: alternating between continents, following each successive generation up to the twenty-first century. From Asante huts to a church in Harlem, from the beaches of Cape Coast to the unrelenting sun over Alabama cotton fields, each of Gyasi's chapters introduces a new, thoroughly believable world. Though intergenerational relationships do develop, each cast is largely contained within their respective chapters. This episodic structure allows even the darkest stories to conclude in hopeful places.

Gyasi, a Ghanaian immigrant herself, doesn't shy away from complexity. One of her narrators, a history teacher in Takoradi, challenges his students: "Whose story am I missing? Whose voice was suppressed so that this voice could come forth? Once you have figured that out, you must find that story too." *Homegoing* examines the complicity of African tribes that collaborated with British slave traders. Its long, multi-generational arcs show the bonds between parents and children broken and mended in turn. And there is plenty of mending in this novel. I was struck and encouraged by how *good* every character is—how each narrator ultimately makes choices they hope will allow them to protect or rebuild what they care for.

Malaka Gharib's graphic memoir, ***I Was Their American Dream* (Clarkson Potter, $16.99, 160 pp.)**, contains that same goodwill.



Gharib's text and drawings—done entirely in shades of red, white, blue, and black—tell her story of growing up as a first-generation Filipino-Egyptian-American. Her Filipino mother and Egyptian father meet in the United States, where they hope to achieve a life in the suburbs with a two-car garage and annual trips to Disney World. This life never comes to pass. Instead, Malaka (as she is called in the book) grows up trying to navigate several different cultures simultaneously, with mixed results. Her father is Muslim, her mother Catholic. One page features young Malaka lying in bed at night, praying to "God and the Virgin Mary, but sorry, not you, Jesus."

After her parents' divorce, Malaka spends summers with her father in Egypt—but though she likes the country, she never feels quite at home there. She's too American. Similarly, she isn't quite Filipino enough to meet the standards of her classmates, who criticize her for trying to be cool by liking "white stuff." Moving to the East Coast for college, she struggles once again to find a community where she fits in. Several pages are dedicated to her desire to talk about her background with disinterested fellow students who "don't see color" or are unimpressed by her heritage. Another full spread shows her culinary fantasy: floating on clouds of fluffy rice, munching on crispy fried spam from home.

Malaka is lighthearted even when tackling serious issues, like the lack of minority representation in media—on one page, high-school-aged Malaka describes white people as "real Americans" who "do normal stuff like eat sandwiches for lunch." Years later, working in an office after college, she ticks the boxes off a pledge to "be the real me." Items include: "Stop pretending I like eating sandwiches."

For such a quick read, *I Was Their American Dream* includes a lot of thoughtful analysis. Scanning the pictures and text, the reader participates in Malaka's project of becoming herself, providing the audience she wanted in college. Her American story is exuberant; encountering it, I was left more joyful, more aware, more grateful than ever for my own family and friends. They support me in each new chapter, wherever I make my home.

Isabella Simon *is the editorial assistant at* Commonweal.

Helene Stapinski

One of my pet peeves as a nonfiction writer is nonfiction that's presented as fiction. Maybe the writer is (A) too lazy to make sure all the facts are right; (B) not brave enough to own the story as nonfiction; or (C) wants to masquerade as a novelist in hopes of seeming more "literary." Writing fiction—whipping up people and places from scratch—is hard. Nonfiction is hard for different reasons: the need to ensure accuracy, the risk of angering your subjects. But both require writing talent.

When I flipped through Juliet Grames's novel ***The Seven or Eight Deaths of Stella Fortuna* (Ecco, $13.99, 464 pp.)**, I was worried. At the back of the book is a short essay from Grames in which she reveals the provenance of her tale, which is in the reality of her grandmother's life. But once I began the novel, my concern ebbed. It starts with a letter from the character who will be telling us the story (the granddaughter, and in some sense, the author). From the moment I got past this framing device, I was kidnapped and held hostage for a full week by Stella Fortuna and her family members. And I didn't care whether they were fiction, nonfiction, or some crazy hybrid of the two.

Grames takes us where few stories about the Italian-American experience

have—into the kitchens, bedrooms, and even bathrooms of the women who've lived it. Typically left on the sidelines, making beds or chicken cacciatore (remember *The Godfather*), in Grames's hands they're the engine that makes the Italian-American family run (and the engineers that keep it on track). Rarely have their hopes, dreams, wounds, and near-deaths been seriously depicted in literature, since the male characters were sucking all the air out of the railroad apartments they lived in after they immigrated here.

I think of the validation I felt recently when I learned that Mario Puzo based Don Corleone on his strong mother. Grames takes female lives that normally would have been ignored—–for instance, describing in vivid detail the day an old family photo was taken, down to what dresses and shoes were worn and why—and blows them into the high drama they deserve. Italian or not, we've all come across that crazy grandmother or aunt, who may rant or have a decades-long vendetta against someone else in the family. We shrug her off and laugh. But this book tells us why she's the way she is and leaves us wondering what stories in our own families have gone unexamined.

The story starts in Calabria in the days right before World War I and carries us, and its mostly female characters, to L'America—not the romanticized, sepia-toned version we're used to, but one with bloody, dysfunctional, sexist, feces-streaked details that could have been culled only from actual family interviews, dogged research, and firsthand experience with women relatives like these. One of my favorite moments comes when Stella eats a bowl of pasta and can tell from the taste which of her relatives cooked it. Subtle, but beautiful.

Grames uses fiction to take us that extra step: into the minds of her characters, into the delicate workings of their relationships with one another, and into our own sense of who we are as sisters, mothers, victims, and ultimately, everyday heroes. Whether your ancestors were Italian, Irish, Puerto Rican, German, African, or some combination, you'll never quite look at them—or this blessed melting pot of a nation—the same way again after reading Stella's story.

Sigrid Nunez sets up her latest novel as a fake memoir addressed to a dead friend and fellow writer, delving into his suicide and her adoption of his Great Dane, Apollo. An outgrowth of an actual memoir she wrote on her friendship with Susan Sontag, ***The Friend* (Riverhead Books, $16, 224 pp.)** not only takes a personal story and raises it to new heights, but examines the writing life itself.

Nunez discusses the unspoken truths that we sensitive writer souls often skirt—our envy of one another, the morality of betraying people in our lives for a good story, the absurdity of writers' workshops. More than that, it lays bare the angst that we all feel, not just as artists or human beings, but as animals placed side by side on earth.

Maybe it was because my Australian Shepherd, Blue, had just died when I picked it up last year, but *The Friend* hit me hard. The book was a surprise bestseller for the veteran author and went on to win the National Book Award, so it seems a lot of people were as touched by it as I was. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Nunez explained that she hadn't started out with a narrator so close to herself, but her life just "seeped in." While she was working on the book, a writer friend committed suicide by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge.

Maybe the reason writers lean toward fiction rather than nonfiction—even with stories taken from life—is because memoir has made it possible for people like comedians, actresses, rock stars, or anybody with a dysfunctional family (this author included) to make the bestseller list, further cheapening an already questionable profession. As Nunez says in her book: "To write and have something published is less and less something special. Why not me, too? everyone asks."

The words are not Nunez's own, but those of the French critic Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, circa 1839.

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ANTONUCCI

Behold the Child

ROBERTO J. DE LA NOVAL

In the Christ child, God chose to need us. This is the message of Christmas: the profound vulnerability of the divine as it divests itself of glory in order to assume the form of a fragile creature—and a baby at that.

But babies grow up, and so did Jesus. From youth to adulthood he progressed, and as he grew in wisdom and stature he left behind childish ways. Indeed, he asserted his adult prerogatives regularly: by distancing himself from his parents in the temple, making a whip and driving out moneychangers, excoriating the religious leaders of his day, taking charge and raising the dead when the time was right. Behold Christ the *man*.

Does that mean his childhood was left behind as a mere stepping stone for the serious adult business of the redemption of the world? No. If we believe that Jesus is the revelation of the Father, then he must be so at every stage of his life, and we have good reason to think that the first years of Christ's life occupy a privileged place in our interpretation of the rest of the Gospel story.

This may seem like a counterintuitive claim: How can Christ's childhood, which is not even mentioned in the gospels of Mark and John, hold such theological weight? But the fact is that Christ repeatedly privileges childhood as the defining mark of redeemed—and thus true—humanity: "Unless you become like a child, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3); "To such as these belongs the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:14). The gospels clearly teach that Christ came to make us children again. And that means we cannot understand the Incarnation properly if we miss that Christ the man never ceased to be Christ the child.

Consider the neediness of a child. Throughout Christ's entire adult ministry we see that he retains this disposition as a daily reality: he depends on the financial contributions of the women who travel with him (Luke 8:1–3); he has no place to lay his head (Matthew 8:20); indeed, there is no pillow even for his final sleep, and had it not been for the tomb donated by Joseph of Arimathea, Christ would have been buried in a criminals' pit. How similar all of this is to Jesus' infancy, when a humble stable proved to be his first home. And just as he was swaddled as a baby by his mother Mary, so he would be swaddled by her after his death.

What of the Passion itself, in which Christ was led, like a child, where he "wouldst not" (John 21:18)? In every moment of his Passion he exhibited the vulnerability of childhood. He pleaded with his Father before his death, asking not to die while freely submitting to the Spirit's illumination of God's will. In his confrontation with Pilate, he refused to claim his rightful throne in the manner of the kings of this world, and was instead robed in scorn and crowned with thorns. In the end, he returned to the nakedness of his first days. Behold Christ the child.

Our Lord is truly meek and mild—and hidden like so many children who go unnoticed by us. His most obscure birth would be matched by an equally shrouded rebirth, his barely noted resurrection. Christ remains the invisible child in his ascended reign, concealed in the church's sacraments and awaiting our response to his grace.

It should therefore come as no surprise that when we seek to encounter Christ today, we find him chiefly in the needy and helpless of this world. The Christ we meet in the vulnerable is the child Christ and none other. The hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, prisoners, refugees, the sick, and, of course, children themselves—all these carry in their bodies the vulnerability and dependency that never leave us, the openness to wounds *and* to love that is the privilege and risk of the child.

Children may be weak, helpless, needy, but they are not quiet: they demand the love that rightly belongs to them, the care, the affection, the embrace that will satisfy their small but capacious hearts. This cry of the Christ child is the weakness of God that St. Paul speaks of, and we are reminded of it every day by all the sorrows and disasters that befall us without heaven's interference. Some of these take place on the world stage, others in the smaller theaters of our own communities: spouses divorcing, children abused and neglected, jobs lost, friends suffering from chronic illnesses that suffuse every conscious moment with pain—all these will not be overcome by the strong God, the God who storms in and brings justice to the brokenhearted in one fell swoop. I want my God to make bread from these stones, these stumbling blocks placed everywhere in life's path. And yet my prayers for myself and for those I love rarely effect the visible change I desire. To claim God's weakness is ultimately to own the *inefficiency* of a child in God's providential ways.

Yet children can also break our hearts. And when our hearts break, the hardened soil is prepared to receive the good news of ultimately victorious love, which the Sower casts far and wide. If we come near to the suffering Christ child in our midst, if we pick him up and hold him, he will water our hearts with his tears; up will grow the fruits of faith, hope, and love. And if we, as the Christmas hymn invites us, "come to own him" this season, he will come to own us too, and we will know his strength—the strength of a child who grasps us by the neck and will not let us go.

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