A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

Commonweal

FEBRUARY 22, 2013

ENOUGH!

JO MCGOWAN ON THE RAPE CASE THAT HAS SHAKEN INDIA

INTERRELIGIOUS ISSUE

BETH DUFRESNE ON INGRID MATTSON

MARIA KAPLUN ON EXILE & CONVERSION

DONALD SENIOR ON 'ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS'

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LETTERS

The meaning of an advertisement

BAD AD

In your January 11, 2013, issue, you ran an advertisement for a film produced by Catholics for Choice. Why would you publish something promoting an anti-Catholic, proabortion movie? I know it makes *Commonweal* appear broad-minded, but many practicing Catholics think it makes you look foolish, and that printing such an ad is disrespectful to sincere Catholics.

LAURENCE BURNS
Grand Rapids, Mich.

OUT OF CONTEXT

I was profoundly saddened to find a full-page advertisement from Catholics for Choice (CFC) on the inside front cover of your January 11 issue. I rely on *Commonweal* for a deeper examination of the joys and anguishes one encounters as a Catholic. To find this ad in your magazine—for a group as antithetical to Catholic teaching as is CFC—does not bode well for the direction of the magazine. The ideas promoted by Catholics for Choice should be considered only in the context of an editorial or an article. Running the ad represents a conflict of interest because advertisers regularly direct the content of magazines by underwriting their production. I want to see the continued, Catholic, unbiased search for truth that I associate with *Commonweal*. On the back cover of the same issue, you published a house ad featuring a young college student who readers might help to "understand the issues facing contemporary society" by contributing to the magazine's College Subscription Program. Why should I pay to help send CFC's ad to her? Will your implied acceptance of CFC's message help her find joy and truth within the community of believers, or will it reinforce the view that the immediate, self-centered good is in fact the ultimate good?

TIM PRATT
Salt Lake City, Utah

IT'S NOT ME, IT'S YOU

Today I canceled my subscription. Your decision to publish an ad from Catholics for Choice—and to place it inside the front cover—raises serious doubts about your claim to be independent and Catholic.

I have subscribed for twenty years. Over that time, I've enjoyed *Commonweal*'s editorial bent—truly challenging yet always faithful to the magisterium. By running this ad you have endorsed a view of conscience as absolute. I will miss *Commonweal*, but even though I'm saddened, I'm losing a friend I no longer recognize.

TIMOTHY KITZKE
Milwaukee, Wis.

THE EDITORS REPLY

We thank Lawrence Burns, Tim Pratt, and Timothy Kitzke for their letters, and we wish to assure them that, as any regular reader of the magazine knows, *Commonweal* shares their skepticism and unease about the agenda of Catholics for Choice. Inevitably there is an element of subjective judgment involved in accepting or rejecting an ad, especially from an advocacy group. Many readers object when we run advertisements for military chaplains, either on pacifist grounds or because they judge recent U.S. military interventions to contradict well-established Catholic teaching. We understand the objection, but unless there is evidence to the contrary, we assume the goodwill and moral sincerity of those who wish to place ads with us on disputed moral or political issues. *Commonweal* publishes authors who disagree with the opinions of the editors and the teachings of the church, and our ad spots are similarly open to a variety of institutions and viewpoints. Ads are not endorsements. Thus, if an advertisement avoids outright distortion or demagoguery, we are inclined to accept it. In this instance, we viewed the movie being advertised. Although the arguments made by those interviewed were not persuasive, neither were they complete distortions or demagogic. Opinions advanced in a civil and measured way deserve a hearing, and it would be a mistake to pretend that there are no Catholics who think this way about abortion—or to silence those who do.

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SHORT TAKE

INTERRELIGIOUS ISSUE

Screen, p. 20

Jackie, Lynn, and Sue at age seven, as seen in 56 Up, *a film by Michael Apted*

FIRST RUN FEATURES

This Will Do

On February 1, the Department of Health and Human Services released a "Notice of Proposed Rulemaking" that included two important changes to its controversial requirement that most health-insurance plans cover contraceptives at no cost to women. Together, these two changes should put to rest the claim that the HHS mandate wantonly violates religious liberty. Questions may remain about the wisdom of the mandate as a matter of public policy, but its critics should at least stop claiming that it's motivated by hostility to the Catholic Church.

The first change in the new HHS proposal simplifies the conditions for an exemption from the mandate. Previously, an employer had to meet several ill-formulated criteria: the employer's purpose had to be "the inculcation of religious values," and most of those it served or employed had to "share its religious tenets." Many critics complained that these criteria might be understood to exclude churches that ran soup kitchens or homeless shelters—or helped anyone in need without regard to his or her confessional status. With its new proposal, the HHS has adopted the Internal Revenue Code's much simpler definition of a "religious employer," the one that determines which employers have to pay taxes. It is unlikely that the original HHS criteria would ever have been interpreted to the disadvantage of any real house of worship, but there was no reason to leave any doubt—or to introduce a doubtful understanding of religion in a set of insurance regulations. As HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius acknowledged, the old rules "caused more anxiety and conflict than was appropriate."

The second change announced by HHS is more substantial. It provides a comprehensive explanation of how employees and students of nonprofit religious institutions that *don't* qualify for the exemption will be able to get coverage for contraceptives without the institutions themselves having "to contract, arrange, pay, or refer for" services to which they object. Such institutions will simply notify their provider that, for religious reasons, they decline to pay for an insurance product that covers contraceptives. The provider will then be required to offer a free stand-alone policy for contraceptives to employees or students of the institution. The provider will bear the up-front costs of the extra coverage, but in the long run such coverage turns out to be "cost neutral," since paying more for contraceptive services now means not having to pay for as many births later.

When this work-around was first proposed last year, it remained unclear how the accommodation would affect nonprofit religious institutions that insure themselves instead of buying a group plan from an insurance company. According to the new proposal, the companies that administer the health plans of these self-insured institutions will be required to arrange for a third-party provider to offer—and pay for—a separate policy covering only contraceptives. Since the issuer of such a policy won't enjoy any long-term savings because of it, the federal government will offset the issuer's costs by reducing its fee for selling insurance in the new online exchanges. The accommodation still doesn't extend to private business owners who object to paying for what they regard as an immoral product. As Eduardo Peñalver has pointed out at dotCommonweal, nothing would have prevented the HHS from asking insurers to do for *any* employer what they will now be asked to do only for nonprofit religious organizations. Indeed, it might have been simpler and more prudent to avoid the whole controversy by making this a mandate not for employers to pay for coverage of contraceptives, but for insurance providers to offer it separately—and at no expense—to any policyholder who doesn't already have it, especially since this coverage is good for their bottom line.

Of course, most other services *do* cost insurers money. The government could not so easily accommodate every employer who had a moral objection to something on the government's list of things all health insurance should include. If a Scientologist, say, didn't want to pay for his employees' psychotropic medication, the government could not fairly ask that his insurance company eat the cost. In other words, the Obama administration's shrewd accommodation of Catholic nonprofit organizations doesn't provide a generalizable solution. It is a one-off fix, made possible by the particular economics of reproductive health care. It has no bearing on the constitutional principle, affirmed by the most conservative members of the current Supreme Court, that religious believers are not exempt from laws of general applicability. The claims of conscience must never be ignored, but they do not necessarily entitle one to relief from any practical difficulty that arises from disagreeing with most of one's fellow citizens about a duly enacted law. ■

Charles R. Morris

Old Boomers, New Boom

WILL OUR POLITICS CATCH UP WITH CHANGES IN OUR ECONOMY?

An old joke about business management consultants is that if a client company is centralized, they tell management to decentralize; and if it's decentralized, they straightfacedly urge centralization. The truth is that such seemingly inconsistent advice is almost always right.

There is no correct form of business organization: each one solves certain problems and creates others. If a diversified manufacturing company is experiencing serious quality-control problems, consolidating factories under quality-conscious managers can make a major difference. But as time goes by, complaints will arise about rigidity and lack of customer responsiveness: pressures will build for decentralization.

Politics and theories of governance follow similar cycles. But in a democracy, there is no CEO who can simply mandate a change in the problem-solving paradigm. So it takes a big buildup of ideological fervor to turn the wheel, and it takes a lot longer. Cycles in governing styles usually last twenty-five or thirty years.

We made such a turn in 1980, which was well overdue. Regulation was pervasive—the government told banks what interest rates they could pay. Marginal tax rates were very high. Whole industries had become cozy, price-fixing cartels that were getting murdered by the Japanese and Germans. A newly aggressive Soviet Union was profiting from American confusion.

The new consensus slashed taxes, cut regulations, pushed back against the Soviets, and virtually eliminated the federal government's role in the delivery of social services. The Earned Income Tax Credit is a successful small-government antipoverty program that looks as though it will endure through several political cycles.

The deregulatory zeal of the 1980s produced predictable pratfalls, like the savings-and-loan crisis. But business was re-energized, labor productivity rose dramatically, and by the 1990s, the country was on a roll. By the first decade of this century, however, the "hyperpower" pretensions of the George W. Bush administration were a sign that the cycle had run its course. It didn't end gently. It will be years before we dig out from under the mortgage fiasco, or shed our fractious dependents in Iraq and Afghanistan. At least the global financial crash may have ended the illusion that markets are always right.

The United States may be at the brink of a new economic boom. A "reshoring" of industry is underway. Rising expectations among Chinese workers are gradually reducing the labor-cost advantage Chinese industry has enjoyed. Energy, for example, is now much cheaper in the United States than in China. An industrial revival will force major improvements in our infrastructure—roads, airports, pipelines, power-transmission systems, high-speed internet.

The key feature of the 1980s–'90s cycle was that the Baby Boomers were at their peak productive years, and the leading-edge industries revolved around microchips. Getting government out of the way and letting Silicon Valley do its thing made sense. The key feature of the new cycle will be the need for government involvement. The expanding gas and oil industries will have high impact in terms of space, water, and the environment. As the International Energy Agency has argued, these industries require a "social license" that is embedded in firm, fair, and consistent rules and regulation so they can realize their promise without unnecessary damage. The first industries moving to take advantage of America's cheap energy are heavy industries—iron and steel, chemicals, cement. Old-fashioned liberals like me have long lamented the lack of blue-collar jobs, so we can't complain if they're, well, industrial—with lots of 24/7 truck traffic and the like. Look at what is going on in North Dakota.

And then there are the Boomers, now pretty long in the tooth, even as the spectacular gains in health-care technology steadily expand standards of treatment. (Remember, all that money for Boomer health care doesn't go to the Boomers; it goes to those providing health care, which happens to be our largest, and one of our best-paying, industries.) And the responsibility for rebuilding our industrial infrastructure will fall to the government, as will mounting the necessary job-readiness programs in industrial machining, introductory geology and petroleum engineering, and so on.

Unfortunately, Republicans and too many Democrats are still focused on cutting programs, especially health care, because they add to deficits. The truth is, if we fixed all our health-care system's inefficiencies, we would still need more money as the population ages. If the government is to expand its role as it must, it will need to raise more revenue.

The United States now imposes lower taxes at all levels, as a percentage of GDP, than almost any other advanced country. If we raise taxes across the board by a few more GDP percentage points, we'll still have one of the lowest total national tax burdens, while giving the government the resources to discharge its role in the economic shift that is almost upon us. ■

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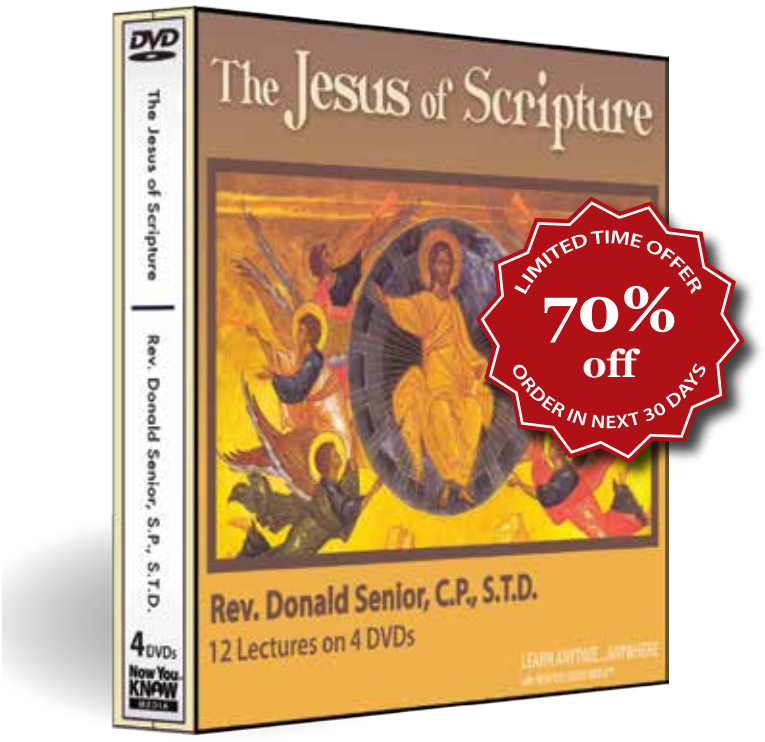

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Jo McGowan

Breaking the Silence

RAPE & INDIA'S HONOR CULTURE

Candlelight rally in Calcutta, December 2012

In December a brutal gang rape stunned all of India. Protesters poured out onto the streets every day for weeks in New Delhi (where the rape occurred), as well as in other cities and towns across the country. The ruling Congress Party, silent for over a week after the event, was finally forced to respond to public outrage, but Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's scripted remarks sounded tepid and detached, ending with a remark he thought was off-camera: "Was that fine?" The government's inadequate response incited further anger—and demands for action.

International coverage of the incident has been widespread and persistent. When the victim, Jyoti Pandey, finally died in Singapore, where she had been flown for treatment at government expense, the calls for justice grew louder still.

Yet during those days of protest, there were hundreds of other rapes in India, including one whose victim was a two-year-old girl. She, too, died of her injuries, but of course she had not been flown out of the country for treatment. In fact, no other rape case has received more than a few small paragraphs deep in the city section of the daily newspaper. So why did this one story shake the nation?

While it doesn't really matter what finally woke us up, some of the facts are interesting to consider. It was first widely reported that Pandey was a medical student from an English-speaking family who had raised her to be independent and progressive. It later transpired that she was in fact a student of physiotherapy and the first in her family to go to college. While her family were indeed proud of her, they are by no means progressive. Her father was at pains to explain to the press that the boy she was with when she was attacked was only a friend ("like a brother"), and that there had been no question of their being a couple because the boy belonged to a different caste.

But when the story first broke, the educated elite reacted with horror and anguish precisely because Pandey and her friend seemed just like them. They could imagine themselves or their children in the same situation: coming out of a theater late at night, unable to find a taxi, finally boarding a bus with relief and gratitude only to be beaten with iron rods as the bus hurtled through the streets of New Delhi. Pandey was dragged to the back of the bus and brutally raped. She and her friend were finally thrown from the moving bus and left to die.

Stunned and jolted by this incident, women have finally begun speaking out in public about what they endure every day in public transit, on the streets, in their offices, and in their own homes. The press has been full of first-person accounts of childhood sexual abuse, rape, fondling, indecent exposure, lewd remarks, groping, often at the hands of relatives. Demonstrators in New Delhi spoke emotionally about their refusal to put up with this any longer.

Despite all the grief and anguish over a young woman's murder, there has also been something almost exhilarating about the public response. In the past couple of months, I have felt as if the country is witnessing the birth of a new age. Women are speaking out, and not only about rape or sexual abuse. Collectively, we are testifying against an entire culture that enables and defends violence against women.

My friend Rachel King, a British woman who came to India as a student in the 1980s, has described in painful detail the experience of riding in a bus in New Delhi:

> A woman standing on a Delhi bus is completely at the mercy of the other passengers. She has to put one arm up to strap-hang, and she has to use her other arm to keep track of her bag—because, of course, as well as being physically assaulted, she is also in danger of having her bag rifled through and her purse stolen. She doesn't have a free hand to swat away the hands that brush her breasts, stroke her buttocks, or try to get between her legs. Because the bus is so crowded, male passengers will take the opportunity to stand very close to her, using the bus's swaying movement as an excuse to move rhythmically against her. Some men look away while they do this. Some stare insolently into my eyes.

My friend Natasha Badhwar, a Delhi-based filmmaker and writer and the mother of three girls, talks about the silence imposed on her and the women she grew up with:

BISWARUP GANGULY

We are taught to feel shame. We internalize the primacy of family honor. Don't tell anyone. What will the neighbors say? Your grandfather will be angry. Father will be hurt. Or worse, father may kill you. Look down and carry on. Don't engage with aggressors. There's no point in involving the police. Learn to avoid trouble. These are the messages we carry in our heads.

My own daughter, now studying at Yale, is still amazed at how different daily life can be outside India: "When I first got to the United States, I thought something must be wrong with me. No one was staring at me. No one even looked at me twice. I felt invisible. It was wonderful."

For those of us who want to stay in India, action is now required; in fact, it is long past due. Women's groups are moving beyond expressions of rage to concerted efforts to hold lawmakers to account. They are demanding fast-track courts for crimes against women, training for police, and an end to antiquated definitions of rape. (According to the notorious "two-finger rule," a woman whose vagina can admit two fingers by the examining doctor cannot have been raped because she is already "habituated to sex" and therefore must have asked for it.)

Efforts at reform are complicated, however, by the fact that a significant number of India's political leaders have criminal charges pending against them for offenses including rape and domestic violence. Such politicians have no interest whatsoever in ensuring speedy prosecutions. The need for systemic political change is clear. The growing popularity of the Aam Aadmi Party, whose main plank is to rid the government of corruption and create systems that ensure accountability, is a source of great hope.

But it is one thing to get rid of corruption, another to address the deep and pervasive beliefs about the place of women in Indian society. As long as rape continues to be seen as a fate worse than death for its victims, justice for rapists will not help women move on in the aftermath of the attack. They will continue to be seen as damaged goods, lost to society, worthless.

Furthermore, the public outcry over this particularly savage case, in which the perpetrators were strangers, may obscure the fact that the vast majority of rape and other sexual violence occurs at home. The victim is usually familiar with her assailant, and there are usually few physical scars—hence the conspiracy of silence that allows such crime to go unpunished.

Still, the silence has been broken, at least for now. Women are talking. But I have lived in India for thirty-two years, and I have seen these awakenings before. A judge hands down a spectacularly stupid decision; a right-wing religious fanatic places the blame for violence against women on women themselves. There is a flurry of outrage. Legislation is introduced. Nothing changes. We all go back to sleep.

This time feels different, though. Coming on the heels of last year's powerful and sustained outpouring of support for the India Against Corruption protests, these rumblings may signal more than just "protest as usual." Indeed, the government has responded with uncharacteristic speed by convening an official commission to review the current situation of women and make specific recommendations for further action. Voluntary organizations, student groups, and individuals across the country submitted notes for consideration (including one from disabled women activists who demanded acknowledgement of the particular hazards faced by women with special needs). The Justice Verma Commission's report, released in January, has been greeted with satisfaction, guarded optimism, and continued insistence on action, not words.

There is also a growing awareness of the need to create change at a personal level: we are at last talking candidly about the difference between the way we bring up sons and the way we bring up daughters, about what we tolerate in public spaces, about what we avoid addressing in our neighborhoods and what we pretend not to see in our own homes. Neighborhood watch groups and hotlines are being formed; individuals are committing themselves to stand up when they see a woman being targeted.

These are small beginnings, but they are something. Few things have shaken me as much as what happened to Jyoti Pandey. Yet seldom have I been as moved and as hopeful about the possibility of change in this country as I am now. ■

Jo McGowan, *a* Commonweal *columnist, writes from Deradoon, India.*

A View from the Edge

Ingrid Mattson, the Face of American Islam

Bethe Dufresne

A little more than a year ago, in November 2011, Catholic and Muslim leaders from around the world convened in Jordan for the second forum hosted by A Common Word, an organization created in 2007 to promote interfaith engagement by highlighting similarities in the teachings of Christianity and Islam. While the inaugural forum had been held at the Vatican in 2008, this time the group met along the Jordan River, near the site of Jesus' baptism. Among the Muslim delegates was Ingrid Mattson, a Canadian citizen, U.S. permanent resident, and convert from Catholicism who served as president of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) in 2006–10. She was the first woman elected to that office, and this distinction had helped propel her into the global spotlight.

The Jordan assembly was small and "very friendly," Mattson recalls, and its main topic—shared concern over disrespect for religious symbols—a reasonably safe one. But knowing there can be barriers between two such delegations, Mattson had brought an icebreaker: her eighty-year-old Catholic mother, who was making her first trip to the Middle East. "Here we were, mother and daughter, Catholic and Muslim," Mattson recalls. "It was interesting how we were able to humanize the relationships." She enjoyed imagining what further interreligious overtures might have been possible had she also brought along her sister—a convert from Catholicism to Judaism.

When it comes to challenging Western stereotypes about Islam, Ingrid Mattson seems ideally cast—a Muslim, yes, but with the accent, the interests, the family life, and the hobbies of your typical educated middle-class American. While she savors literature by José Saramago, the late Portuguese Nobel Prize–winner, she's also a fan of television's *Mad Men* ("The writing is *sooo* good!"), *Nurse Jackie*, and *Sons of Anarchy*, about a California biker gang. She is an athlete. She's mom to two grown children, and her husband—an Arab with dual U.S.-Canadian citizenship, whom she describes as "nurturing"—has moved throughout their marriage to accommodate her jobs. She has even broken with Islamic tradition by acquiring a dog. Muslims generally consider dogs "unclean" and unworthy of sharing a house with humans. Writing on her *Huffington Post* blog, Mattson explained that she drew on a Qur'anic passage about a noble dog to justify her decision.

Mattson's résumé, including a 2009–10 stint with the Interfaith Task Force of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, has "interfaith" stamped all over it. She is the author of a book, *The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life*, praised for its scholarship and accessibility. Government, media, academic, and civic institutions call on her for Islamic insight into issues such as poverty, gender, race, and justice, and she is a senior fellow of the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought in Amman. Last fall she took on a new chair in Islamic Studies at Huron University College at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario. But at forty-nine she has lived much of her adult life in the United States. From 1998 until this past summer, she was director of the Duncan Black Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, an affiliate of Hartford Seminary. In a series of interviews over the course of six months, Mattson spoke with me about her spiritual journey and the challenges of being a spokesperson for a faith misunderstood and often maligned in the West.

Modesty is a virtue much prized in Islamic cultures, and, like most Muslim women, Mattson wears the headscarf known as a hijab. Because her dark hair is hidden and she does little to accentuate her dark eyes and delicate features, people don't immediately realize how pretty she is. Her daughter sometimes chides her for appearing stern or angry in photographs, but a more apt description would be intensely focused. "There is a gravitas about her that is reassuring," says R. Scott Appleby, a professor of history at the University of Notre Dame and a leader in efforts to bring Muslims and Christians together. "She's a serious person, yet also very human, approachable, and in her own way personable."

Much has been written about Mattson's conversion to Islam, but the fact that she grew up Catholic has usually been only a footnote. It's something she's eager to correct. "It's important to me to express my gratitude for what that community gave me," she says, crediting the Catholic women religious of her youth with providing "a fantastic educa-

Bethe Dufresne, *a frequent contributor, is a freelance writer living in Old Mystic, Connecticut.* *Funding for this article has been provided by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation.*

tion" and "a place to explore and develop this early, youthful spirituality." With tenderness she relates how Catholicism once informed almost every aspect of her life. Mattson was born in Waterloo, Ontario, in 1963, the sixth of seven children of a criminal-defense lawyer and his wife. Her parents were both raised Catholic, and the church, in one form or another, was ubiquitous. "We lived only one block away from two full blocks of solid Catholic institutions. There was the elementary school, the girls' high school, the boys' high school, the nuns' convent, and the priests' rectory. It was just your world."

The family attended Mass on Sundays, but didn't say the rosary at home, or even routinely say grace. Yet as a child Mattson was devout. "I would go to church every day during Lent on my lunch break, and in Advent I would go more. In those days little kids were allowed to go around by themselves, so I would just go. Very often I would go by myself to do the Stations of the Cross. I was really into it." A big attraction was the peace and quiet of church, the reprieve it offered from the chaos of a household of seven kids—including four boys, all of them wrestlers. The church—and especially the convent, where she took piano lessons—became Mattson's refuge. "I'd think to myself, 'Oh, it's so clean, so neat, so organized.' I loved it that the convent was just a bunch of women living together. No one was going to put me into a headlock there!" And the sheer beauty of church buildings lit up Mattson's inner life. "I had a very natural spiritual orientation that was supported by the majestic spaces in the church, and by ritual. I found them to be good venues for that spiritual connection."

Ingrid Mattson

Mattson's father died just before she turned thirteen, and at fourteen she got her first job (as a waitress). In her teen years, she excelled on her school's hockey and swimming teams, and in her spare time read Leonard Cohen and boycotted South African fruit to protest apartheid. It was during those years that her enchantment with Catholicism came to an abrupt end—in the classroom, where she resisted her religion class's teachings about God and the requirements of Christian faith. "It was the introduction of doctrine that really messed things up," she says. "It didn't register. I don't remember if it was about salvation, or the Trinity...but it had nothing to do with the way I felt, and my experiences intellectually. It wasn't convincing." When her teacher wouldn't or couldn't answer her questions, Mattson turned to the school priest. "It was funny," she says. "He just told me that I'd figure it out."

What Mattson figured out was that she had to leave the church. "I no longer believed in Christian theology. Most important, I did not believe that Jesus was the Son of God. There was never any question, therefore, that Christianity would ever again be an option for me." When her mother noticed she had stopped taking Communion, Mattson explained that it felt hypocritical to do something so meaningful to others when she herself didn't believe in it. "My mother asked what I did believe in," she recalls, "and I said I didn't know. She said 'I hope you find it.' That was her prayer."

Eventually she would find it, but right then, Mattson recalls, "I just left the whole thing and didn't think much about it. I forgot about God altogether." At the University of Waterloo, she majored in fine arts and philosophy, eventually writing her senior thesis on the Bayeux Tapestry. In the summer before her senior year, she visited Europe, taking a film course in Paris. She brought her bike, and after the course ended she set out to see the country; along the way she befriended a group of Muslim students from Senegal and Mauritania she met at an outdoor concert. They were her first exposure to Islam. She followed them to West African dance clubs and listened to them discuss authors they were reading, including Frantz Fanon and his impassioned indictment of colonialism, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Mattson was captivated by the group's company and conversation. "A lot of them spoke Arabic to each other even if that wasn't their mother tongue. I like languages, and I realized there was this language that a gigantic part of the world speaks that I knew nothing about."

Back in Waterloo, she enrolled in an Arabic course. She was curious about Islam, and her teachers gave her a translation of part of the Qur'an. The Arabic language is celebrated for its beauty, and nowhere is this beauty more evident than in the Qur'an. But as Mattson read, something beyond linguistic beauty took hold of her. It was a momentous feeling, she recalls; "an awareness of God, for the first time since I was very young." It wasn't something she welcomed—"I really didn't want to have to deal with religion in my life. I wasn't looking for that"—and she tried to ignore it. The feeling

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persisted, however, and eventually she yielded. "I realized that it would be hypocritical of me to just pretend it wasn't there. So then I started really to embrace it."

In time the feeling became a full-fledged reawakening. There was no question of revisiting Catholicism or exploring other religions. "It was the Qur'an that gave me back faith in God," Mattson says. "I recognized the God of the Qur'an as the God I had always known but had forgotten and neglected." The Qur'an also resonated with her intellectually. While Muslims revere Jesus as a prophet, in Islam no human being can be considered divine. And so while Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad was God's ultimate messenger, they do not worship him as Christians do Jesus Christ. This principle helped ease the theological difficulties Mattson had experienced as a teenager.

Conversion to Islam involves making a declaration of faith before witnesses, and Mattson declared in the spring of 1987, in the home of two teachers. No one in her family was present, and their absence expressed skepticism about the step Mattson was taking. "Most of them," she recalls, "didn't really think it would stick."

And the transition did prove difficult. Explaining her conversion to friends and acquaintances—some of whom thought Islam was a cult—was hard. Then there was the question of how to conduct her social and personal life. Mattson had to resist "some really bad advice" from strict Muslims who told her, among other things, never to be in a place where there was alcohol—including her family's home. She could not embrace such strictness. If she had been married with children, says Mattson, it might have been easier. But she was still in college—and in a city, she notes wryly, that was home to the world's second biggest Oktoberfest. "I didn't want to make these big barriers between myself and my family and friends who weren't Muslim."

Searching for the intellectual means to bring her two worlds together, she found them in the writings of University of Chicago professor Fazlur Rahman (1911–88), a Pakistani scholar who contended that the Qur'an can be reinterpreted for modern societies. "He was a modernist," says Mattson. "He wanted people to understand that premodern Islamic terms couldn't necessarily be applied to modern concepts." Rahman taught that "even though Scripture is the eternal word of God, attention must be paid to the context of the reception." He became Mattson's intellectual mentor, and she chose a PhD program at the University of Chicago in the hope of studying with him.

But first she spent a year in Pakistan, sent by a Canadian Muslim organization to work with refugees from the war in Afghanistan. The work was fulfilling—Mattson helped arrange a grant from the Canadian International Development Agency to train midwives in a refugee camp of a hundred thousand—but she found Pakistan rife with "extremists and fundamentalists." "In many ways it inoculated me from having a so-called romanticized view of the Muslim world," she says. "It gave me a clearer understanding that Islam isn't necessarily more authentic in Muslim majority countries." Mattson cites a Qur'anic sura: *There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab and for a non-Arab over an Arab, nor for the white over the black nor for the black over the white, except in piety.* Her Pakistan experience confirmed the truth of the sura, dissuading her of the notion that "authentic learning" could only be found in non-Western places. She returned wiser—and also happier, having met her husband, a fellow volunteer at the refugee camp. They married in Pakistan.

'When you're in a culture that for generations has been Muslim, almost every cultural norm acquires a religious hue. But when you move into areas where that's not the case, you have to start making distinctions between religion and culture.'

Mattson spent most of the 1990s in Chicago, working toward her PhD (in Islamic law and history) and raising two young children. Shortly before receiving her degree in 1999, she was offered the job of director of Hartford Seminary's Macdonald Center. Along with teaching courses in Islamic studies, she would develop the first nonmilitary Muslim chaplaincy program in the United States. For Mattson it was a dream job, allowing her to continue her academic work while serving the larger community of Muslims in America.

And so in 1998 she moved her family to Connecticut. By all accounts, her work at the seminary was highly successful. Omer Bajwa, coordinator of Muslim Life for the Chaplain's Office at Yale University, studied with Mattson while earning his graduate certificate in Islamic chaplaincy from Hartford Seminary. He praises her as "a great mentor" and credits her with "embryonic support" for the very idea of Muslim chaplaincy. Patrice Brodeur, a Catholic who holds the Canada Research Chair on Islam, Pluralism, and Globalization at the University of Montreal, and who worked with Mattson on *The Muslim World* journal, lists the qualities that distinguish her as a leader: a deep knowledge of her own faith and a solid commitment to it; extensive familiarity with other faiths and a willingness to engage with them; and a desire to improve quality of life for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

In 2001 Mattson became the first woman elected vice president of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). She assumed the volunteer post in August, anticipating a demanding but not all-consuming second job. Then came September 11. *Islamophobia* suddenly entered the mainstream lexicon, and her life became an endless exercise in crisis management. "I slept with my BlackBerry, and was always

getting up to respond to something." Paradoxically, 9/11 helped boost Mattson's prominence as a spokesperson for Islam. Absent the crisis caused by the attacks, she speculates, some conservative Muslims might have resisted a non-Arab woman as the public face of the religion. And non-Muslims, primed to see Muslim men as terrorists-in-waiting, were more receptive to a woman. Yale's Bajwa says there's no question that most non-Muslims would be more comfortable with her than with "someone who looks like me, a young Islamic male of South Asian descent with a large black beard."

Mattson recalls the period following the attacks as a hard one for Muslims in this country. In 2002, the U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services ordered all men from any of twenty-five countries to report to an immigration office and have their papers checked. "All of these countries were Muslim countries except North Korea." In Mattson's view, this was plain religious discrimination disguised as national security. One positive development after 9/11, on the other hand, was the emergence of allies and friends in the civil-rights and the interfaith communities—"people who really stood beside us," Mattson says, and whose efforts helped teach Muslims "what it meant to have shared values and shared principles and to be in solidarity with other people." Before 9/11, many Muslims were "standoffish" and "fairly isolated in their socially contained world." But 9/11 taught them the importance of being part of broader society.

A decade later, the events of the "Arab Spring" have finally put the lie, in Mattson's view, to the notion that Arabs hate the West for its freedoms. "For American Muslims after 9/11, because of the constant questioning of their loyalty, we were very keen to emphasize our American-ness, that 'we are good, and it's the rest of the Muslim world that's messed up.' Now we're able to point to tens of millions of Muslims who want the same things that we do."

Being the public face of Islam in America has exposed Mattson to harsh criticism. In an article posted on the conservative blog *American Thinker*, Stephen Schwartz—like Mattson a convert to Islam—blasted her as "a promoter of radical Islam" after she spoke out against the needless provocation of a proposed Oklahoma law banning the use of sharia, or Qur'anic law, in the state's courts. Schwartz wrote that Mattson's conception of sharia as "a whole set of approaches to living your life in a way that brings you closer to God" was a "sweeping definition" rejected by moderate Muslims, who apply sharia only to "intimate religious matters" such as diet, prayer, and other rituals. Schwartz wrote that Mattson's "specific citizenship may be unknown," yet "when she appeared as a Muslim representative at the inauguration of Barack Obama, Mattson presumably acted as an American." According to Schwartz, Mattson, and ISNA embrace a variety of Islam that is "fundamentalist and radical, oriented toward Saudi Wahhabism, Pakistani jihadism, and the Muslim Brotherhood;" her covert goal is "to advance radical Islam with a North American face." Daniel Pipes, founder of the Middle East Forum and a prominent backer

PAHA SAPA REDUX

I dreamed of Stonehenge and its megaliths
rising from mists and myths,
then dreamed of Easter Island and the stone
giants propped on plinths,
then dreamed of minotaurs and labyrinths.

I dreamed of Rushmore, then of Crazy Horse,
blasted and bulldozed mountain bone,
and Ziolkowski. Drill the charges, and of course
stand free of flying stone.

It was Midsummer. The pious at Bear Butte
tied prayer flags to the trees
that skirt its breast, its hips, its knees.
So long as pinyon pines bear sundried fruit
scattered from every cone,
no one, not even Murphy, dreams alone.

—Timothy Murphy

Timothy Murphy's newest books are Mortal Stakes and Faint Thunder *and* Hunter's Log, *both from the Dakota Institute Press.*

of Israel, has called ISNA "a key component of the Wahhabi lobby" and Mattson "an apologist for Wahhabism."

Such accusations sting. Mattson insists that they are baseless, and that the West's anxiety about Islam arises from a profound misconception; the fear that Islam wants to destroy democracy and liberal Western values, she says, is "a lot of hysteria that's not based in reality." People "will cherry-pick a statement from some extremist or some twelfth-century text," she complains, "but Muslims didn't stop thinking and developing in the twelfth century." She argues that sharia is "a concept, not a codified set of laws, so there's a lot of diversity" globally in its application and emphasis. "I have all these law books, and there's no book called 'Islamic Laws.'"

An essay Mattson wrote soon after 9/11 for Beliefnet describes the "double-bind" she sees American Muslims in—having to apologize for "reprehensible actions committed by Muslims in the name of Islam" such as terrorism, oppression of women, and persecution of religious minorities, while also having to apologize for U.S. foreign policy, including "support for repressive governments" and opposition to any UN resolution critical of Israel. It is an uncomfortable position. "But frankly," Mattson concludes in the essay, "American Muslims have generally been more critical of injustices committed by the American government than of injustices committed by Muslims." This has to change, Mattson argues. "Because we have freedom and wealth, we have a special obligation to help those Muslims who do not—by speaking out against the abuses of Muslim 'leaders' in other countries."

From within this double-bind, Mattson searches for a middle road between polarized viewpoints. Concerning the 2005 controversy over a Danish newspaper's publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist, she condemns the violence that subsequently erupted—but wonders why Denmark's blasphemy laws were not applied. "People can be taken to court for speaking against the Danish Church, so the question was, can't that be extended to other religions?" This past summer, when an internet trailer for a cartoonish video mocking the Prophet Muhammad, produced in the United States, once again ignited the issue, Mattson recognized the issues of free speech at stake. She doesn't believe that the U.S. government can or should do anything to stop such material being put on the internet. "But many people in much of the Muslim world won't understand that, because they live in countries where the government can censor information." An understanding of freedom of speech in Muslim countries is closely linked to higher levels of education and literacy, she notes, "and that is the long-term solution"—and American Muslims have a "special obligation" to help it along.

For all the criticism she received during her years in the United States, Mattson clearly relishes not only having lived in the world's greatest melting pot but also being a Muslim here. A favorite book of hers is Richard W. Bulliet's *Islam: The View from the Edge*, which posits that the most fruitful evolutions in Islamic civilization often take place far from the center. Mattson sees America as one of those vital edge realms. "When you're in a culture that for generations has been Muslim," she points out, "almost every norm, even if it's just cultural, acquires a religious justification or hue. But when you move into areas where that's not the case, you have to start making distinctions between religion and culture." What results is a more conscious and well-thought-out form of the faith. "What do we think about the right way to dress, or how the family should be constituted, whether the mother works outside the home or not, and the extent to which a father is involved with his children's upbringing? We are forced to have these discussions because of our diversity, and I think that makes the American community very dynamic."

Mattson pays attention to the ways religions throughout history have been interpreted and wielded, even twisted, for various personal and collective ends. "It's a perennial issue with any scriptural tradition," she says. The second edition of her book on the Qur'an has an expanded focus on hermeneutics (interpretation theory), taking specific verses of the Qur'an and demonstrating how different scholars have interpreted them differently. Because passages from the Qur'an are so often used to stoke fear of the religion, I asked her for simple answers to some of the thorniest questions Americans raise about Islam. Does it

in fact countenance forcing people to join the faith? Does it advocate killing those who reject or leave it? And is polygamy allowed?

Her answers are: No, No, and Yes. But she insists it isn't at all simple. On the first two questions, she points out that the Qur'an plainly states "There is no compulsion in religion." Yes, it also contains an injunction to "kill the idolaters wherever you find them." But the context of this command, Mattson argues, is not daily life as we know it today, but a battle between warring groups in a premodern world where religious and political allegiances and identities were indistinguishable. People in that world didn't leave their community "just to wander around," but rather to join another group, often amidst hostilities. Leaving one's religion was thus tantamount to treason, a capital offense in most countries even today. There are still Muslims who advocate death for abandoning the faith. But most modern Islamic scholars, says Mattson, agree "that the Qur'an gives no earthly punishment for leaving one's faith."

As for polygamy, practiced by the Prophet Muhammad—and by both Barack Obama's Kenyan father and Mitt Romney's Mormon grandfather—it is indeed allowed in Islam. But Mattson contends that the Qur'an's "ethical thrust" has always been toward monogamy. In premodern times, she explains, polygamy was often practiced as a means to care for widows, or for girls who were orphaned. The existence of restrictions indicates that polygamy was never considered an ideal state, and Mattson argues that you can outlaw it while remaining faithful to the Qur'an if the conditions that originally prompted it no longer exist. "Most people, most men even, don't want polygamy," says Mattson. "It's not like having a mistress...marriage is about responsibilities, kids. Most people find it challenging enough to have one spouse and a few kids."

Such views reflect Mattson's ongoing project of reassuring non-Muslim Americans and reducing their distrust of Islam. She is a resourceful and persuasive defender of the faith, frequently summoning stories and events in the news that may be counterintuitive to Americans who have come to see Islam as a harshly punitive and unforgiving religion. She argues, for instance, that if the U.S. courts and legal scholars *did* actually look to Islam and sharia for legal guidance, they would find an emphasis on forgiveness, as well as on individual rights. Take, for example, the contentious issue of capital punishment. Islam allows the victim's family's wishes to be considered in sentencing, says Mattson—and teaches that while retaliation is permissible, "it is better to forgive." She points to the case of the Bangladeshi-American Muslim Rais Bhuiyan, who tried to stop the execution of a Texas man who had shot him in the face in an act of random retribution for the 9/11 attacks. Though partially blinded in the shooting, Bhuiyan chose forgiveness after

contemplating the Qur'an during a pilgrimage to Mecca. He even persuaded the families of two Muslims killed in the same Texan's shooting spree to join his petition to stop the execution. The state of Texas prevailed, and the killer, a white supremacist, was put to death in 2011. But before he died he said that Bhuiyan's intervention had made him feel loved for the first time. The killer himself was the victim of a horrible life, say Mattson, and because of Bhuiyan's attempt to save him, "He felt love at last. It's a beautiful story."

Such stories counter what Mattson considers the U.S. media's excessive focus on grotesque tales of vengeance in Muslim countries carried out by extremists claiming to implement sharia. As for the charges of antidemocratic tendencies in Islam, including the suppression of speech and culture, she points to the experience of hundreds of millions of Muslims in Muslim-majority democracies like Indonesia, Turkey, Bangladesh, and Kyrgyzstan, or nations on the perilous road to democracy, like Egypt. Most Muslim-majority democracies "have been able to accommodate a robust freedom of religion and conscience," she asserts, "even if it says 'Islam' somewhere in the constitution." On Islam's views of cultural freedoms, Mattson reverts to the Qur'an's "no compulsion in religion" clause. Take alcohol, for example. While it is strictly forbidden in the Qur'an, Mattson embraces the views of Muslims who argue that to ban it for non-Muslims would be akin to compelling them to adopt Islam. Arguments have even surfaced that since the Qur'an's prohibition specifically refers to "the grape," other types of alcoholic drinks are permitted. If anything is conclusive about this, it's that Muslims argue about social rights and obligations just like everyone else.

Regarding the claim that Islam subjugates women to men, Mattson notes that Bangladesh, Turkey, Indonesia, and Pakistan have all had female heads of state—and that her own organization, ISNA, elected a woman to lead it. Polls on gender issues in religion show that Muslims are "just behind Jews in having the most educated women," she points out, while "a third of Muslim-American women are professionals, and they have the most economic parity with men." The view that men can dominate the public life of the community "is simply incorrect Qur'anically," she says.

So what about Saudi Arabia, where women can't legally drive, go out in public unveiled, or travel without a man's permission, and just last year were granted the right to vote (and only in municipal elections)? It's not a representative example, Mattson insists—while noting that even in Saudi Arabia, women outnumber men in higher education. She prefers to focus on Turkey and the emergence there of a middle class she views as "religious and activist-oriented." At the Hartford Seminary she came to know a number of students from that movement, and admired their zeal for going out to educate other Muslims around the world. These groups of Muslim evangelists remind Mattson of Rotary Clubs. "They're a completely different alternative to the Saudis—very business-oriented, religiously conservative and focused on family, but not extremist or militant or misogynist. They have an integrationist, bourgeois view."

Mattson acknowledges other points of conflict between Islam and the liberalism of American life—such as issues of sexuality, on which most Muslims are very conservative. Sexual intimacy outside marriage is forbidden; and as for gay rights, she admits that the Qur'an seems "pretty explicit in saying that homosexual intimacy is not permissible." Less clear is how this theological view should play out, if at all, in legal spheres and public life. "A surprising number of [Western] Muslims believe the state should not discriminate against same-sex couples in marriage," Mattson contends. "The state should afford equal rights to people and not make public policy on the basis of a theological proposition." This belief, she notes, springs directly from the experience of being a religious minority, fearful of being discriminated against themselves. "A lot of people don't like what we believe or practice."

Regarding abortion, Mattson explains that the Qur'an discusses stages of fetal growth in minute detail, with "a clear sense that a certain amount of physical development occurs before the soul is breathed into this developing life. There's life before there's a soul, so the question is pinpointing when the soul enters." Abortion after the ensoulment is prohibited except to save the life of the mother—an exception made "because the mother has existing responsibilities and relationships that take priority over a human being that has the potential for those but hasn't developed them." Contraception has always been allowed in Islam, she says, noting with a grin that when men asked the Prophet Muhammad about the withdrawal method, he told them it was fine—but "not to count on it working!"

This past June, Mattson taught her final course at Hartford Seminary—"Women in Islam"—and prepared to leave the United States for Canada, her native land. Patrice Brodeur, the Toronto professor, predicts that she will face many of the same challenges there as she has here, plus one. Whatever happens in France reverberates in French-speaking Quebec, and France has had major conflicts with its Muslim population over its bans on headscarves in public schools and the burqa, or Islamic face veil, in all public spaces. Mattson opposes these bans as violations of religious freedom, and is sure to make this position known, in her serenely diplomatic way.

The day of our last meeting Mattson herself was wearing a colorful hijab and casual pants with a bold modern print—an emblematic outfit for this woman whose life has so vividly combined two cultures and traditions. When I complimented her hijab, she recalled a visit some years ago to Indonesia. "One of the things I loved about Indonesia," she said, "was seeing these cute girls, young women wearing miniskirts and blouses and riding scooters, pull up to a mosque and grab a scarf out of their backpacks." She laughed, recalling the image with obvious pleasure. "*Vive la différence!*" she said. ■

The Thorny Path

A Russian in America, a Catholic Jew

Maria Kaplun

In a certain sense, every Christian is Jewish. This is something I could have told you years ago—I'm a scholar of religion, after all. But it's possible to know a thing without fully comprehending it. While I knew that Christianity started out as a sect of Judaism, I did not realize the depth of their connection until they came together in my one heart.

A Jew by birthright, I am connected to a nation spread around the globe, to a mythos and a vast history. It is the fabric of me, undeniable and inescapable, and as definitive as my humanity, my womanhood, or my Russian culture. Yet raised in the secular society of the Soviet Union, I would not have known fully what it meant to be a Jew if I hadn't been reminded of it since early childhood by the pervasive anti-Semitism of the people I lived among. This is a common experience of Jews in diaspora. Observant or not, we come to understand our Jewishness through rejection; we learn our past through its history of disaster and flight, looking back toward ancient roots and preserving tradition in order to hold on to ourselves.

Jeanne d'Arc, *Jules Bastien-Lepage, 1879*

I am also—by conversion—a Christian. This double identity has been a challenge at times. Trying to explain to my Christian friends that I was not about to cease being a Jew, and to my Jewish friends that I was not betraying my Jewishness, I used to talk about Love and the great, abstract and mystical vision of reality—the oneness of all things. And I pointed out that Jesus was a Jew. But only recently did I suddenly and truly grasp what this meant to me. The realization took place not in my mind but in my heart, and like all great realizations, was obvious and simple: Jesus is not just compatible with my Jewish heritage; he *is* my heritage.

As a Jew I am one of Jesus' people, the people he asked to hear and carry his message. I am the inheritor of the Scripture he quoted, of the law he obeyed, of the history that shaped him, and of the prophetic word that titled him messiah. Jesus made an extended Israel, with all of humanity invited; every soul that wants to belong to him belongs by definition, and so I belong to him with countless brothers and sisters. We are all Israel in Christ. But I also have the blood of Abraham running through my veins. I am the inheritor of the covenant, with the burden and the pain of it already on my shoulders, and I spent decades struggling with the meaning of that burden before collapsing—like Simon, like Mary, like Matthew and Paul—at Jesus' feet.

Being a Catholic Jew is not the extent of my oddity. I am a strange bird in the Catholic Church of today, when more are leaving than coming—for I am not just coming, but doing so with a call to vows, in discernment of religious life. After a lifetime of atheism, I found the meaning of existence one

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night on the floor of my little apartment, in the quietest, simplest, most ecstatic moment I have ever experienced—a still, small voice and a series of answers to my questions. At almost forty years old, I had fallen in love. And I realized that I had never been alone.

People call this my "conversion experience," appropriately enough, I suppose. It was my first day of peace, the moment that stilled the echoing mayhem of despair in my mind and steeped my whole being in the warm light of Love personified—the day I understood enough to understand that I would never understand. But perhaps my conversion began long before that day, in the years I spent searching for answers—frantic, enraged, at times suicidal—and throwing up rhetorical demands to the heavens I thought to be cruel or indifferent. Or perhaps there is no such thing as conversion. Perhaps there is only a path for each of us—one so convoluted at times that when it finally leads us to that meadow, soft with wavy grasses and caressed by sunshine, we cannot believe we haven't been turned around. I wonder if there isn't only one path for each of us, and it leads to God.

Born in the Soviet Union in the midst of the Brezhnev era, I was raised in the customary Communist and atheist way of my nation; and while critical of the missteps taken on the way to building a society of freedom and fulfillment, I was convinced of our ultimate success. Together with my generation I hailed the beginning of glasnost, only to be stunned by the economic and social destruction that followed perestroika. That destruction was accompanied by a surge of rabid anti-Semitism. In 1991, as Russian Nazis were holding rallies in the squares of Leningrad and rumors of pogroms filled the air, my family and I, bruised and frightened, packed our bags and knocked on the door of the American embassy. I left the Leningrad Conservatory Music College, my family left their careers, and all of us left everything we'd ever loved and known, to land on a continent completely strange to us, without English, without money, and without a clue.

This was twenty-two years ago—more than half my life. Because of a wrist injury suffered during the move to America, I could not continue playing piano, and after a period of trying just to survive and to learn English, I started my higher education from scratch at a local community college. I went on to graduate school and eventually became a theologian. Along the way I worked at a farmers' market, served in the Army, went to law school, did a stint as a medical interpreter: I became an American, in other words, the adopted daughter of a nation that wanted me when my own didn't. I now teach Catholic studies at a tiny and beautiful college. And sometimes I find myself musing on how I got here.

The atheist society that brought me up aspired to the highest and noblest ideals. It taught me about selfless love, respect for honest effort, sincerity, sacrifice, compassion, and the proud human spirit. It taught me that hopeless fights for a noble cause are never hopeless. It taught me the importance of equality, freedom, and the fulfillment of all. It taught me to care. Later, in America, after all I'd loved while growing up had been lost, I fell back on apparently unanswerable questions that kept me up night after night: Why? How can the world be this way? I had two things, my family and my questions, and I clung to both.

Those questions drove me to study religion. I see now that in digging into the teachings of collective human wisdom accumulated over millennia, I had all along been looking for a way to believe in an ordered universe—a reason for suffering—even as I insisted that there was no God. An atheist theologian, I thrashed around in my mind's cage, constructing theories and splicing religious traditions, practicing one ritual and then another with every group in heartfelt friendship but without faith, for one question remained woefully unanswered: How can there be all this evil, all this pain, in a world that belongs to an omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent God?

Like many before me, I rejected the concept of God because I preferred he not exist than that he exist and let evil happen. I didn't want a God I would have to blame, so I called myself an atheist. And yet blame God is exactly what I did. I threw up to the heavens my rage, my resentment, my confusion, and my desperate pleas; I called out his name, this God I didn't know I knew was there, and I shouted

at him and yelled insults and provocations—and heard, in some strange and perverse quarrel of the imagination, many answers in kind.

In truth I hadn't really been an atheist for several years. But the decades I'd spent leaning into tearing winds and steadily gaining ground—those decades led me to where I am now, this place where seemingly mutually exclusive truths are small brushstrokes on God's unfathomable canvas, all fitting into the one Beauty of His Creation.

My family members remain atheist, and they love and support me. But they think I forgive God too much.

Do I forgive God? Indeed. But I don't think it's too much. Too many of us walk through life drying up and dying because we can't forgive. I spent most of my life blaming God for this world's pain, and on the day they call "conversion," when my heart quieted and allowed itself finally to feel his touch, we forgave each other.

I accept now that this world is not perfect. Nothing temporal can be unchanging; nothing changing can be perfect. By the very virtue of pouring forth this temporal universe, God accepted its imperfection.

Is our suffering, then, part of the design? God's collateral damage?

I don't know how the world works, but I know—I feel with everything I am now—that God is not an absentee landlord, an uncaring observer of suffering. In the years when I could not forgive him for the evil of this world, my mind kept going back to the places where pain was being inflicted on people by people, the powerless tortured by the powerful, and I could find no justification for God if he was present and watched and did nothing—or if he was absent and did *not* watch.

I understand now that my binary way of thinking was flawed. The world is not God's toy. Rather it is a continuation of him, and the expression of his nature, permeated by and filled with him. God doesn't watch the suffering of the world. He feels it, just as he feels its joy.

At creation the world lost its eternity in God but gained its fluidity in time, and began to change and develop, so that at the end of time it could become a thing more beautiful than we children of imperfection can imagine—so that it could flow back into God's eternal reality and enrich it with its uniqueness, its temporally experienced love.

I have forgiven God for the pain of the world, and I believe that he has forgiven me for my imperfection. I have forgiven God because our pain is his pain, and he endures it for the sake of the beauty, the love, and the promise the world contains. He has forgiven me because he was just waiting to, because all things imperfect in me are temporary but my love is not. My personal story might be viewed as a thorny path through the collapse of a society, the humiliation and poverty of emigration, through uncertainty, nostalgia, and despair; but it brought me here, to my meadow view, and this view is my gift and treasure. ■

Rand Richards Cooper

Class Photo

'THE CENTRAL PARK FIVE' & '56 UP'

Most Americans forty or older will recall the 1989 case of the young woman brutalized by a rampaging mob of teenagers while jogging in Central Park. Coming amid soaring crime rates, the attack spawned a scary neologism, "wilding," and mass public revulsion that took on a racial tinge when five black and Hispanic teenagers quickly confessed. I recall the news images of teenaged males being hustled out of police stations, heads down; like nearly everyone else, I shook my head at how depraved they were, and how guilty.

Except that they were not.

A joint effort of famed documentarian Ken Burns and his daughter, Sarah, *The Central Park Five* shows how five young American males of color were railroaded into confessing to a crime they didn't commit. In extensive interviews all five, now in their thirties (one declines to appear on camera but provides off-screen commentary), recount being held overnight without food or sleep, alternately badgered and reassured by detectives who promised that if they implicated other members of the group in the crime, they could "go home." Eventually all five caved in. It was a textbook case of faulty interrogation techniques. "The goal is to break the suspect down to helplessness and despair," comments a psychologist expert in coerced confessions. "Once the confession is taken, it trumps everything else." All five quickly recanted their confessions, but it was too late.

Burns *père et fille* channel the toxic zeitgeist of late-1980s New York. The revolution in financial services was well underway, and a city long in decline suddenly acquired a new *über* class of wealthy young traders and analysts—the victim, a young investment banker, belonged to this new golden elite—even as a crack-cocaine epidemic among its underclass had driven violent crime to record levels. Following soon after the notorious Bernhard Goetz subway shooting, the Central Park jogger attack revealed these tensions, bringing to the surface a pervasive but not fully articulated social narrative that had been percolating for some time among the city's dominant classes—that of wild young black men preying on innocent white people—and energizing privileged whites to rare displays of vehemence. "This was a proxy war," recalls *New York Times* reporter Jim Dwyer. The five teens, it is clear in hindsight, didn't stand a chance.

Perhaps scariest of all is the fact that, apart from active malfeasance by some investigating detectives, everyone involved, whether prosecutors, press, or outraged citizens at large, seems to have honestly believed the five were guilty—a mass groupthink that powered a rush to judgment. *The Central Park Five* presents a heuristic thought experiment in what cognitive psychologists call confirmation bias. As long as you assume the five *must* be guilty, then their confessions seem damning; assume, however, that they might well not be guilty, and suddenly all sorts of flaws and contradictions appear.

No one who mattered, however—either in the justice system or among politicians and the press—made this crucial assumption. Indeed, so resistant to correction were the prevailing biases that even when a convicted rapist and killer stepped forward, years later, and confessed to the crime (a confession confirmed by DNA and a pile of corroborating details), many cops, prosecutors, and press pundits refused to back down, even in the face of overwhelming evidence; and in 2002, when Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau, acknowledging "troubling discrepancies" in the original confessions, reversed course and agreed to let the convictions be vacated, he was reviled by many.

As for the Central Park Five themselves, to a man they come across as gentle souls, remarkably free of bitterness although clearly harrowed—fully aware of the price they paid in lost years. Most moving to me was the 1989 videotape showing the eldest suspect, sixteen-year-old Kharey Wise, making his confession; continually rubbing his face and eyes, as if willing himself to wake from a nightmare, he presents the desperate aspect of a young man who knows he's digging a hole, but can only dig further. In prison Wise stopped going to his own parole hearings, knowing that the prime condition of early release—admitting remorse for a crime he didn't commit—was the one he would never agree to meet. His and the others' obdurate refusal to renounce their innocence, even with freedom at stake, testifies eloquently to the deep human need for justice. When asked by the filmmakers to recall his reaction on learning, after thirteen years of incarceration, that his conviction had been overturned, Wise tears up. "It just felt so…*good*," he says.

An equally powerful reflection on class has been fashioned over recent decades by British director Michael Apted, whose *7 Up*

SUNDANCE SELECTS

series charts the lives of fourteen Britons first captured on film as seven-year-old schoolchildren, way back in 1964. Every seven years Apted (whose mainstream accomplishments include *Coal Miner's Daughter* and the James Bond film *The World Is Not Enough*) has checked back in with the group, updating viewers on the lives of "the TV kids," as they are known to fellow Britons.

The premise of the original television documentary was simple: Let a range of children express their hopes for the future, and they will reveal the fundamental power of class to shape, and limit, personal destiny. And so, over shots of the children playing in the schoolyard, the film's narrator intoned the Jesuit motto: "Give me a child until he is seven, and I will give you the man." Yet what started off as an attempt to demonstrate a sociological point—the hidebound nature of class in Britain—has become something much larger and far less dogmatic.

If you haven't tuned in to any of the prior seven installments, don't worry; Apted skillfully weaves earlier episodes into the current one, using deft cuts to present startling, sometimes amusing biographical juxtapositions over time, as when Suze is captured as a chainsmoking, alienated twenty-one-year-old, vowing never to have children—and then, in the next frame, at twenty-eight, with a squalling baby in her arms. The earliest interviews highlight sociological extremes, contrasting the film's three posh boys—singing "Waltzing Matilda" in Latin, earnestly reeling off which Oxbridge college they will attend years hence—with a trio of carefree chuckling girls from East London, or with two somber, wide-eyed boys in a "charity home," wariness lowering their voices to a whisper.

In one sense, the film's premise has held up; the working-class kids became working-class adults, the children from educated families are educated professionals. But the portraits Apted creates make clear that these arguably preordained destinies are not the only, or even the most important, thing about his subjects' lives. Seen over the arc of decades, these lives show us that happiness—in marriage, with work and children, and above all with oneself—is by no means an exclusive property of the propertied classes. Above all, they reveal the enduring and crucial role played by temperament. Happiest of the lot is the irrepressible Tony, a scrappy Cockney kid who fails as a horse jockey and ends up a lifelong cabby; successfully negotiating an at-times difficult marriage, he works hard, saves money, buys a vacation time-share with his family in Spain, and lives with grateful gusto from one laugh to the next. "I'm a very very lucky man," he says; "I know I am."

The most moving story is that of Neil, a dreamily imaginative child who by *21 Up* had dropped out of university to do manual labor, and by twenty-eight was homeless and clearly mentally distressed. The arc of his life at that point looked so ominous—when asked what he saw for his future, he commented grimly that he expected to be dead—that it is a surprise and relief to find him, decades later, scraping out an existence as a town councilor and a lay priest in a small town in Cumbria—eccentric, to be sure, and somewhat embittered, but still here.

If *56 Up* is less captivating than earlier installments in the series, it's perhaps because life itself is less interesting at fifty-six, or at least less open to change, than it was at thirty-five, when major decisions and outcomes still hung in the balance. If, like me, you're just a few years younger than the film's subjects, you may find yourself unsettled by the distinct impression that they don't anticipate much more happening in their lives. Perhaps this is a difference between Britons and Americans—their muted expectations and resigned good cheer versus our fantasy of perpetual vitality and renewal. Whatever the case, we can thank Apted's group portrait, extended now over half a century, for giving us a coveted window on human development, and in the process quietly building up a majestic achievement in documentary cinema. ■

Thomas Baker

Holy Restlessness

The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Edited by Isabel Best
Fortress, $29.95, 214 pp.

In his short but intensely active life, Dietrich Bonhoeffer held only brief appointments that involved regular parish preaching. As with most churches and their preachers, reactions were decidedly mixed. In Barcelona, where Bonhoeffer (only twenty-two at the time) enjoyed some brief popularity in his German-speaking parish, the resident pastor quickly responded by suppressing the advance preaching schedule. In suburban London just a few years later in 1933, on the other hand, people drifted away from Bonhoeffer's already tiny congregations, preferring the pious style of his predecessor. That isn't surprising, since the first sermon they heard from their new pastor was not the upbeat get-acquainted message we might ourselves expect, but this:

> How is it possible that thousands and thousands of people are bored with the church and pass it by? Why did it come about that the cinema really is often more interesting, more exciting, more human and gripping than the church?... It is because we talk too much about false, trivial human things.... It is because we prefer quiet and edification to the holy restlessness of the powerful Lord God.

"Holy restlessness" sums up the mood of this slim but powerful volume of many of the sermons from Bonhoeffer's parish work, as well as others following his return to Hitler's Germany and eventual murder at the hands of the Nazis. Readers of Bonhoeffer's longer works, especially *The Cost of Discipleship*, will recognize his voice, vividly painting the claims of the gospel and pushing hard against our resistance to them. He wanted preaching to be an astringent antidote for listeners accustomed (as most of us are) to homilists trying above all to be liked and helpful, writing that the preacher's job is to see that the grace of God "speaks to us, knocks on our door, asks questions, warns us, puts pressure on us, alarms us, threatens us, and makes us joyful again and free and sure." There is no time in these sermons for expositions of church dogma or specific moral shortcomings: here the themes are redemption, faith, the Cross, sin and selfishness, and above all the glory and impossible difficulty of love.

At the center, naturally, are the Scriptures, from a four-sermon series on Paul's meditation on love in First Corinthians to the calming of the sea in Matthew. Most preachers fail, he writes, because they "have spiritualized the gospel—that is, we have lightened it up." Preaching on the parable from Luke of the rich man and Lazarus, Bonhoeffer says that we usually reduce this passage, and most Gospel readings, to a story with a moral—in this case, that the rich should help the poor. Instead, he writes, this is a much more difficult Gospel even than that, forcing us to confront our deep disdain for the poor and the wretched, and our reluctance to remember that they are equal to us in God's eyes.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

ULLSTEIN BILD / THE GRANGER COLLECTION, NEW YORK / FORTRESS

Despite the ambition of his preaching, Bonhoeffer also wanted sermons to get to the main point quickly, and never confused them with lecturing or the teaching of doctrine. As a result, most of the sermons here are models of clarity and brevity. To maintain this focus, he often preferred to limit his text not just to a single reading, but to a phrase of just a few words. In one, he asks what Colossians means when Paul told his readers they had been "raised in Christ," and paints a vision of what would happen in our own lives and relationships if we believed it ourselves. My favorite is an Advent sermon that brilliantly uses the recurring image of miners trapped underground, desperately needing rescue and listening for the slightest noise of approaching help, to describe the real urgency of Advent waiting.

Reading these short but demanding reflections one after the other, one does occasionally pine for a bit of relief—if not a weekend football prediction (still a homiletic icebreaker in some parishes), at least a brief smile of commiseration. One or two are so austere that the message of redemption at the end fails to dispel our discouragement, and those directed to younger listeners have a parental stiffness that apparently even the greatest preachers can't always avoid. But Bonhoeffer, as a minister without a long-term portfolio, didn't have to worry about being popular—the working pastor's greatest burden—only about being believed.

That, in the end, is why this is great preaching still worthy of our attention: it has the voice of a preacher who can convince us he not only believes his message passionately but subjects himself and his beliefs to the sternest self-scrutiny. It's not simply that as readers today we can grant Bonhoeffer the moral authority that comes from knowing the heroic end of his story—martyrdom in the concentration camp in Flossenbürg at age thirty-eight. Within the sermons themselves, Bonhoeffer's attempts to hold on to the impossible standard of the gospel are almost painfully honest and pub-

lic. In 1934, as he fought vigorously for a German church independent of national boundaries and Nazi influence, he was tormented by self-scrutiny: "Such a struggle carries a great temptation with it: the temptation of being too sure of oneself, of self-righteousness and dogmatism, which also means the temptation to be unloving towards one's opponent."

Under even more dire conditions in 1938, he preached to his clandestine seminarians in remote East Pomerania on Paul's instruction "never avenge yourselves." By this point, his call to fight oppression and violence only with kindness and Christian forgiveness is even more extreme. "Do not believe," he wrote, "that you know what is good or evil, or otherwise human beings will devour each other.... Who would need our love more than the one who hates? You repudiate the poorest of the poor when you repudiate your enemy." It's difficult to imagine the agony that ultimately drove this conscientious pacifist and ethicist, struggling to meet the standard of perfect love, to join the unsuccessful plot to assassinate Hitler that would bring about his own death. "The great masquerade of evil," he wrote several months before his arrest in 1943, "has played havoc with all our ethical concepts."

Perhaps even those who want more challenge in their weekly preaching would be exhausted by Bonhoeffer in the pulpit. Yet sermons this demanding should still be our inspiration in the face of so many centered on facile catechesis, bland assertion of doctrine, and let-us-therefore conclusions. This book should remind every preacher who reads it of what can happen when passion, humility, and honesty overcome the desire to be liked and the urge to lecture. Bonhoeffer hoped that preachers could "talk about matters of our faith in such a way that hands reach out for it faster than we can fill them." Here is one great preacher's way of accomplishing it. ■

Thomas Baker *is* Commonweal*'s publisher.*

Donald Senior

Our Father

Inheriting Abraham

The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity & Islam

Jon D. Levenson

Princeton University Press, $29.95, 288 pp.

For years I have served on the Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago, an interreligious group that addresses civic issues of common concern. The council began as a coalition of Christians and Jews, under the leadership of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, amid racial tensions surrounding the election of Harold Washington, the city's first African-American mayor. Soon afterward it expanded to include the Muslim community; from then on, council membership was clearly and confidently based on, and limited to, membership in one of these three "Abrahamic" faiths. Some time back, after much debate, the council decided to open its doors to the whole spectrum of religious groups, from Bahai to Hindu to Zoroastrian. It felt like a momentous step to go beyond that tight triad of faiths into the wide, wide world of everything else.

What exactly is the special bond among the three Abrahamic faiths? This is the question addressed by Jon Levenson, professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard University, in *Inheriting Abraham*. An observant Jew as well as an astute scholar, Levenson argues that bonds among the three faiths should not be built on the false assumption that all three view Abraham in the same way—or, worse, on some vague, overarching religious perspective that devalues or ignores the unique religious commitments and particularities of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Such a unity, Levenson fears, can be accomplished only at the expense of one or another of the three traditions—and usually, in his view, Judaism.

Inheriting Abraham begins with an examination of the account of Abraham found in Genesis. Compared with accounts found in later Rabbinic, Christian, and Muslim traditions, the biblical material about the Patriarch is relatively sparse. Two dimensions of the Abrahamic stories are of particular importance. First of all, Abraham is presented as obedient to God's commands, leaving his homeland at God's bidding to set out on a journey to a new land and an uncertain future (Gen 12:1–3). Second, Abraham is promised, despite the challenges of his and Sarah's old age, that he will have an immense progeny and be the "father of many nations" (Gen 17:4–5). Levenson stresses how important the question of "family" and "descendents" is, not only for the Genesis story, but for subsequent Jewish (and to some extent Christian) tradition.

LE SACRIFICE D'ISAAC, MATTHIAS STOM

No example of Abraham's trust in God is more important in the Genesis account, and in the traditions of all three Abrahamic faiths, than the story of the sacrifice of Isaac—the Aqedah, or "binding," as it is known in Jewish tradition—found in Genesis 22. Levenson has published an acclaimed book on this passage (*The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*), and he analyzes its meanings in detail here. In a sense, both fundamental motifs of Abraham in Genesis merge in the story of the sacrifice: his obedience to God's command is put to the supreme test, even as the fulfillment of this command seems to place in mortal jeopardy the promise of an enduring progeny, since Isaac after all is his designated heir and prime descendent. Levenson notes that ambiguities in the Genesis narrative provide fertile ground for the growth of later traditions. One example is the question of whether Isaac was an innocent victim—or a knowing young adult who, in effect, shared in Abraham's heroic faith and offered himself as a "martyr" or witness of extraordinary obedience to God's commands. The latter view would be important for Jewish traditions about martyrdom or heroic fidelity to the Torah (linking Abraham to the stories of the Maccabeean martyrs), as well as for Christian tradition, which saw the Aqedah as a prefiguring of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the beloved Son of God.

A crucial aspect of the Genesis Abraham for Jewish tradition is the Patriarch's enduring role as "father" of an elect or chosen people. While fidelity to God's commands was important, even acts of infidelity did not destroy the relationship God had created with his chosen people, inheritors of the promise made to Abraham. As Levenson notes, "The interplay of the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenants thus yields a theology in which human deeds are critical to the divine-human relationship and yet not exhaustive of it. If the human community—in this case, the people Israel—obeys their divine Lord's commands, they will flourish—if they disobey and are 'hostile' to him, then they will suffer. But the relationship transcends their obedience and their disobedience." This is a critical point in debating the later Christian claim, primarily proposed in Paul's theology, that the status of descendent of Abraham can be forfeited through failure to believe in Jesus as the messiah.

Inheriting Abraham illustrates how the figure of Abraham and some of the stories about him take on new meaning in the evolving traditions of all three faiths. Though Levenson gives most attention to Jewish traditions, he spends considerable time on Paul's theology and does not neglect Islamic interpretations. In several instances, the later traditions attribute qualities or events to Abraham not found in the biblical text. For instance, the portrayal of him as the founder and key proponent of monotheism—and vigorous opponent of idolatry—figures hardly at all in the Genesis stories, yet becomes important

in rabbinic stories that pit Abraham against his own father and his home village, depicted as rampant with idolatry. Muslim tradition also praises him as a defender of monotheism and, in this regard, as a prophet who foreshadows Muhammad himself.

Later Jewish tradition, found in Philo and Talmudic writings, would subtly portray Abraham as anticipating the Law given by God to Moses, discovering all of the demands of the Torah through his contemplation of nature or by God's revelation. Paul and other Christian traditions, on the other hand, view Abraham as justified through faith alone, apart from the Law—which was not yet given—and thus present him as father of the Gentiles, who also were justified through faith and apart from the works of the Law. For Christian tradition, Abraham's role as "father of many nations" underwrites the inclusion of Gentiles in the people of God; Jewish tradition by contrast insists on the chosen status of Israel as a unique people, while acknowledging the many offshoots from this family (e.g., the descendents of Ishmael and Esau) that God's providence allows. Islamic tradition seems to ignore or discount the "familial" dimension of Abraham as "father" of the Jewish people, retelling the Aqedah account either without naming the victim or inserting Ishmael in place of Isaac. In Muslim tradition Abraham is seen as an opponent of idolatry and a supreme moral example of belief in the one God. In effect, Abraham anticipates the prophetic role of Muhammad himself and is thus a true Muslim. "All this points to one of the most peculiar aspects of Abraham in all the Abrahamic religions," Levenson concludes:

> On the one hand, all three revere the man and find him paradigmatic for their own communities, each in its own way. On the other hand, in each set of scriptures the central action of God occurs in a much later period that that of Abraham. In Judaism, it lies with God's gift of the Torah in the time of Moses on Mount Sinai. In Christianity, the central event of all human history lies with Jesus, to some degree with his teaching even more so than with his redemptive death and subsequent resurrection and ascension to his divine father.... In Islam, it lies with God's dictation of the Qur'an, his highest and final revelation and the only true guide for human beings, to Muhammad through the medium of the angel Gabriel.

Levenson spends considerable time on Pauline theology as the supreme exemplar of the Christian view of Abraham. In Galatians 3:6–9, Paul stresses that it was Abraham's faith that made God's righteousness available to him; drawing on the promise to Abraham in Genesis 22:18, Paul views this as opening the way for Gentiles, too, to be justified apart from works of the Law. In Romans 4 Paul reasserts that Abraham was justified through faith and not through the works of the Law, adding that he exhibited his life-giving obedience prior to circumcision. Paul concludes that the Gentiles become authentic descendents of Abraham through faith, apart from either circumcision or obedience to the Law. The true descendents of Abraham are no longer the Jewish people, but rather those who, like Abraham, have faith—which for Paul, of course, means faith in Jesus Christ.

To be sure, Paul is not entirely consistent, as Levenson concedes; he was not ashamed of his Jewish heritage and likely maintained strict observance of the Law even as a Christian. In Romans 9–11 Paul agonizes over Israel's fate, yet seems to envisage that at the end of time, the Jews will be enlightened and accept Jesus as the Messiah. This apparent Pauline delegitimization of the Jews as the true descendents of Abraham provides an opening that some Patristic theologians seized on. Levenson quotes a chilling example, in the writings of Melito of Sardis, of a theology of supersessionism that effectively declares Judaism null and void, replaced or "superseded" by Christianity—a noxious tradition that enjoyed a long shelf life in both Catholic and Protestant teaching, lasting up to our own day.

The book's final chapter ("One Abraham or Three?") notes that while the portrayal of Abraham in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam reveals some notable common ground, far more remarkable is the great variety of interpretation among the three faiths. Levenson opposes the inclination of such commentators as the Jewish writer Bruce Feiler and the Catholic theologian Karl-Josef Kuschel to buff away these particularities in the cause of religious harmony, often by attempting to rescue the "real" and "universal" Abraham of the Hebrew Bible from the subsequent traditions of the Abrahamic religions, which are charged with co-opting the patriarch in the cause of their own narrow religious interests.

Levenson artfully refutes this line of thinking, demonstrating that many universalist views attributed to Abraham are, in fact, not found in Genesis at all, but rather are modern assumptions read into the text. He insists moreover that evolving religious traditions, which accommodate and adapt the biblical text to the ongoing circumstances of time and culture, are the very lifeblood of religious communities, neither to be dismissed nor despised. Levenson questions modern projects—such as "Abraham's Path," developed by the Global Negotiations Project at Harvard University—that seek to spur interfaith harmony by effacing the particularities of the three Abrahamic traditions. It is true that the faiths share a reverence for Abraham, and also a rich tradition of interpreting the meaning of the patriarch. But in Levenson's view, the content of this tradition as found in each of the Abrahamic faiths affords little basis for unity. In fact, he observes, if Judaism, Christianity, and Islam want to find authentic common ground for their standing before God, the proper biblical appeal would be to the Genesis account of Adam and Eve, not Abraham.

Inheriting Abraham is an elegantly written work that succeeds in making Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologies accessible to the nonacademic reader. From a Christian point of view, I wish there were more exploration of New Testament traditions that present the relationship between Judaism and

the emerging Christian community differently from the way Paul does. One trend in contemporary scholarship, for example, holds that Matthew's community considered itself an authentic part of the Jewish community, with Abraham as their ancestor. The Jesus of Matthew declares that "I have not come to destroy the law and the prophets but to fulfill them." It is probable that Matthew's community was law-observant; the difficulty for these Christians lay not in being Jewish—which they prized—but in the fact that their belief in Jesus as the Messiah, and thus the authentic interpreter of the law, was not accepted by Jewish leadership. The inclusion of Gentiles—a challenging issue for Matthew's Jewish Christians—did not mean the delegitimitization of Judaism, but rather, in this final period of history as they saw it, the redefinition of "God's people" to include Gentiles as well as Jews.

Finally, while Levenson correctly challenges some modern writers who attempt to fashion an ill-conceived common "Abrahamic" platform, there exist other important and influential Christian texts, not considered in this book, that foster real dialogue among the Abrahamic faiths while respecting their important particularities and theological traditions. The famed declaration of the Second Vatican Council, *Nostra aetate*, for example, has become both a turning point and reference point for Roman Catholic relationships with Judaism and Islam. *Nostra aetate*—in harmony with Levenson's view—bases the common ground among these three religions not on the figure of Abraham but on the act of creation itself: "For all peoples comprise a single community, and have a single origin, since God made the whole race of men dwell over the face of the earth.... One also is their final goal: God." Later, in speaking of both Islam and Judaism (with which it affirms a unique relationship), *Nostra aetate* cites reverence for Abraham as one of the common traits shared by all three religions.

Even more in accord with Levenson's perspective is the 2001 statement of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Scriptures in the Christian Bible*. That text explores in depth both the similarities and differences between Jewish and Christian traditions, particularly as they relate to interpreting the Bible. Addressing a Catholic audience, this text—formulated under a commission led by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, and formally approved by Pope John Paul II—endorses the validity of Jewish interpretations of Scripture and vigorously opposes a theology of supersessionism, defending the status of the Jews as God's unique covenanted people. Its final chapter acknowledges the many divergences between Judaism and Christianity, but insists that

> This discord [between Catholics and Jews over points of interpretation] is not to be taken as "anti-Jewish sentiment," for it is disagreement at the level of faith, the source of religious controversy between two human groups that take their point of departure from the same Old Testament faith basis, but are in disagreement on how to conceive the final development of that faith. Although profound, such disagreement in no way implies reciprocal hostility. The example of Paul in Romans 9–11 shows that, on the contrary, an attitude of respect, esteem, and love for the Jewish people is the only truly Christian attitude in a situation which is mysteriously part of the beneficent and positive plan of God.

Jon Levenson's superb book demonstrates that despite some simplistic and ill-conceived attempts to harmonize the three Abrahamic faiths, and some lingering supersessionist antagonisms, we live in a period remarkable for serious and thoughtful dialogue among these cousin religions. It is a dialogue grounded in responsible awareness of the complexity, beauty, and defining commitments of each one. Working from this awareness is our best hope of developing the vital mutual respect and harmony our divided world requires. ■

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John F. Baldovin

Cult Hit

Why Priests?
A Failed Tradition
Garry Wills
Viking, $27.95, 290 pp.

The historian and classicist Garry Wills is an astonishingly prolific author whose works range from early American history to contemporary politics, and from Early Christianity to the history of the papacy and current Catholic controversies. Last year he published a book on the theology of baptism of two great Christian figures, Ambrose of Milan and Augustine, and it was wonderful. I wish I could give the same praise to his latest effort.

Why Priests? aims at deconstructing the traditional Catholic theology of the priesthood. Wills wants to eliminate priests from Catholicism, arguing that there is only one priest as such in the New Testament, Jesus Christ—and that even the scriptural designation of Christ as priest (in Hebrews) is problematic. Concerning the place of official church ministries, or offices, Wills concedes that any society must have a system of organization, and goes on to describe the secular terms that designated early Christian officials: "overseer" (*episkopos*), "elder" (*presbyteros*), and "agent" (*diakonos*). Most reputable scholars acknowledge that these functions only gradually morphed into what we know as bishops, priests, and deacons, and that the attribution of priestly or sacerdotal terminology to the priesthood was a slow process, taking hold only in the third and fourth centuries. The narrowing of the idea of the priesthood to the cultic—and especially to the specific power to consecrate the Eucharist—begins in the second millennium, as Edward Kilmartin, whose work Wills employs, pointed out in any number of studies.

At the heart of Wills's argument is the relation between the priest and Eucharist. Aggressively, he sets out to "consider the claim that has set priests apart from all other human beings, their unique power to change bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ." He jousts at an outdated model of the priesthood: men who smelled of soap and aftershave, whose hands never saw manual labor, who drove a nice (black) car, whose preserve was the sanctuary (where they were attended by young boys), and who lived in mysterious and isolated splendor. (Perhaps Wills hasn't noticed, but wherever that world once existed it is now long gone.) The core of this book, however, is taken up with the Letter to the Hebrews, which Wills views as the chief culprit for the errors and excesses of the "failed" priestly tradition.

Wills regards Hebrews as an illogical mishmash of early Christian rhetorical wizardry. In his reading, Hebrews reverses the anticult, antipriesthood, antisacrificial trend of the rest of the New Testament. Wills faults its writer for all sorts of inconsistencies, such as the need for heaven to be purified by greater sacrifices than those offered in the earthly sanctuary (Heb 9:23). He argues that Hebrews reintroduces priesthood into a Christianity that had abandoned it a generation earlier. This helps him make the further claim that medieval atonement theology, particularly in Anselm of Canterbury's satisfaction theory, completes a system that enables ordained priests alone to offer the sacrifice of Jesus. "Anselm's theory," he writes,

> was just a spelling out of the consequences of the Letter to Hebrews. In combination they turned a religion that was originally priestless into one that requires priests at every stage of one's life (at least in the Catholic and Orthodox branches of that religion), from birth to death, from baptism to last rites, with penance and Eucharist dispensed along the way.

This is, to say the least, a vast overstatement. (Wills also misreads the medieval theology of eucharistic presence in Ratramnus, Berengar of Tours, and Guibert of Nogent as merely "subjective," when in fact these theologians were striving for eucharistic realism in the face of a crude and "magical" physicalism—as was Aquinas, with his shrewd and sophisticated theology of transubstantiation.)

Admittedly, Hebrews is a rather strange book. Its author makes Jesus a descendent of the mysterious figure from Genesis who is called "a priest forever" in Psalm 110:4, and this move enables Hebrews to treat Jesus as a priest who transcends the Aaronic priesthood. Yet I think there is another way to look at the issue of Hebrews and the priesthood. In my view, Hebrews does not so much reintroduce the Jewish priesthood as transform it radically by insisting that Jesus is the *only* priest (in varying degrees all Catholics participate in that one priesthood by virtue of their baptism). The problem Wills is most concerned with does not originate with Hebrews, but rather with the later tradition.

Why Priests? left me with numerous other complaints. In its closing section, "Monopoly on the Sacred," Wills offers a terribly sloppy review of the sacraments. For example, he confuses the role of the priest as defined by the Eucharistic Prayer with the priest's somewhat different role in the performance

Garry Wills

JOE SCHUYLER / VIKING

of baptisms and absolution. He also has tendentious things to say about the annulment process, the restriction of the power to absolve sin to priests, and the refusal to baptize someone who has not chosen, or been given, a saint's name.

The book's final chapter deals more extensively with the Eucharist. Here Wills relies on recent scholarship showing that what we know as the Eucharist has many different roots in the New Testament: miraculous feedings, table fellowship, post-Resurrection meals, and of course the Last Supper. He correctly points out that a number of early descriptions of the Eucharist lack what is commonly called "the consecration," or words of institution. The main text he cites is the late-first- or early-second-century *Didache*, a kind of primitive Christian how-to manual. What Wills misses, however, is that the early Christian texts spiritualized the notion of sacrifice in the manner of Romans 12:1–2: "offer yourselves as a spiritual sacrifice." He further insists that the earliest Christian meals were essentially joyful celebrations of eschatological expectation. While such expectation was clearly an element in those liturgies, it arguably coexisted with a theology that related the Eucharist to Jesus' death. The two are not mutually exclusive. Finally, Wills comes to the conclusion (along with the liturgical scholar Paul Bradshaw) that Jesus did not "institute" the Eucharist at the Last Supper. That could be the case, but would that invalidate the tradition's use of the scene to interpret how Christians would partake of Jesus' life, death, and mission? To assume this is to fall prey to historicist literalism.

In my view, *Why Priests?* commits a fundamental error. Catholic teaching grounds the ordained ministry and ultimately the constitution of the church on Jesus' choice of the Twelve, *not* specifically on a reading of the Letter to the Hebrews, however influential that document might have been later on. Furthermore, in his preoccupation with the cultic function of priests vis-à-vis the Eucharist, Wills neglects the theological strides made in the Second Vatican Council's documents on the church and on the ministerial priesthood. The council abandoned any exclusive focus on the cultic aspects of ordained ministry in favor of a much more balanced approach stressing the priest's participation in the threefold office of Christ: priest, prophet, and king. To be sure, the reform of the church initiated by Vatican II is in peril today, and the council's documents were only a step in the right direction, but Wills's *écrasez l'infâme* approach will not help shape a healthy contemporary Catholicism. In this regard he might have done well to consult more evenhanded treatments of these questions, such as Avery Dulles's *The Priestly Office* (1997) or Daniel Donovan's *What Are They Saying About the Ministerial Priesthood?* (1992).

Why Priests? is misguided and anachronistic in one other way. Wills reads the New Testament as fundamentally egalitarian; and while that may sit well

with our contemporary sense of how people ought to relate to one another, it is not entirely true to the evidence. For instance, one cannot blithely oppose the charismatic to the hierarchical in the way Wills often does. For the Pauline writer of Ephesians there is a kind of pecking order among church offices: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (Eph 4:11). And, as Wills acknowledges, the New Testament itself recognizes some development of these offices in the so-called Pastoral Letters. To insist that only the practices and ideas of the first generation of Christians should be normative is to fall into a kind of primitivist fallacy, which denies what Catholicism means by tradition—namely, that the church continues to read the Scriptures in the light of its experience and is confident in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It seems to me that a defining characteristic of the Catholic tradition is to eschew a pure Christomonism—the insistence that only what the historical Jesus said and did matters—in favor of a far richer appreciation of the role of the Spirit (as in John 16:12–15).

Garry Wills is an erudite man (in typical fashion, he provides his own translation of Hebrews in an appendix) as well as a polished and persuasive writer, and he raises important questions about the ordained ministry. Yet *Why Priests?* exudes the same angry and bitter tone as his 2001 *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit*. Once again he has taken a sledgehammer to an issue that requires a much more delicate instrument. We clearly need a good, serious book that moves the ball forward on the theology of ordained ministry, especially in relation to Christian worship. Sadly, this is not it. ■

John F. Baldovin, SJ, *is professor of Historical and Liturgical Theology at the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry.*

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Null & Void?

Lloyd Sederer

When I married my third wife, after two divorces, we eloped, and the ceremony was performed by a Protestant minister. My wife is a woman of faith, an Irish Catholic who, despite misgivings about certain aspects of the church, still holds to its sacraments and prayers. She had had her first (and only prior) marriage annulled. After the two of us were married by the Protestant minister, she continued to attend Mass, but abstained from receiving Communion—since for her to be in full communion with the church, I would have to go through the annulment process myself.

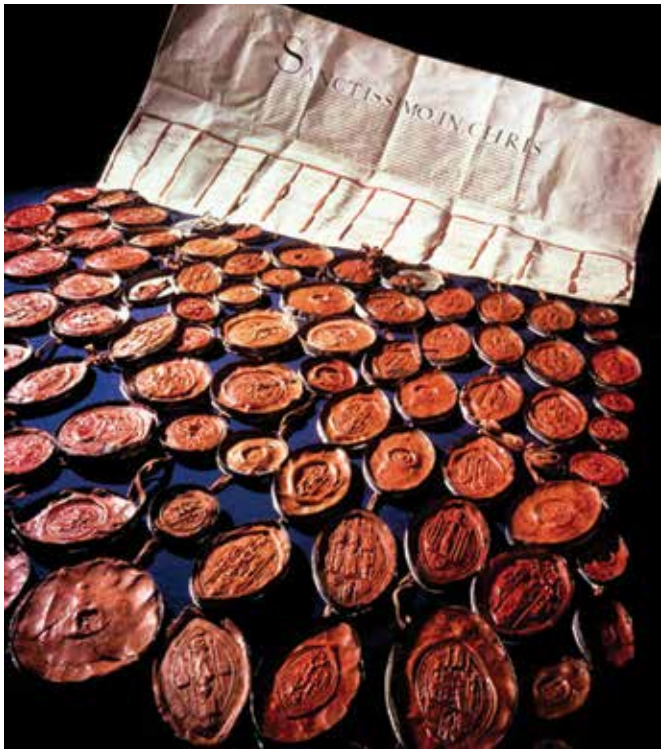
To be honest, as a Jew I did not understand why that was necessary, and the explanations offered by priest friends weren't very convincing. Still, according to church law I needed an annulment before the church would recognize my marriage to my Catholic wife. And so I began the process.

My application arrived in the mail. The form was quite detailed. As a doctor and government worker I am all too familiar with paperwork, and carefully went about providing every required bit of information, lest it be returned on some technicality. After sending in the forms, I scheduled a meeting with the appointed priest. Driving to that meeting, I tried to resist the feeling of being summoned to the principal's office. It had been a long time since I sat before someone for what felt like an assessment of my moral life. In fairness, the church was not forcing anything on me; I was the one knocking on its door and asking for approval. Yet I couldn't help thinking that I had already beat myself up enough—and spent enough time and money on therapy—trying to figure out what went wrong with my first two marriages.

My priest-interlocutor was on time and welcoming. His mien was friendly, his manner thoughtful and learned; he was not at all the judgmental authority figure I had envisioned. Our conversation was reflective and kind, and when it was over, he indicated he would recommend that I be granted an annulment. As I drove away I wondered whether the experience had been akin to going to confession. I was baring my soul to a priest and asking for a type of forgiveness, so that I could go on with my life. I felt a bit cleansed, as though I had been able to see my limitations better and forgive myself for them.

Not long after that interview, the priest called to inform me that I would need not one but two annulments—and that I would need to contact each of my ex-wives (both non-Catholics) and let them know that our marriages were being annulled. In fact, in order for the church to assess my case, my exes had to fill out some paperwork themselves.

I called my first wife. She could not have been more pleasant and accommodating. Time can heal. (She had one question: Would our adult son now technically be considered a "bastard"? Not in the eyes of the church, the priest assured me.) As for my second wife, she and I had had little contact, and the call to her proved more difficult, but with some assistance from friends—and from the ever-helpful priest—we got through it. At last my applications were complete and in order; the meetings and calls were done. The paperwork was dispatched to Rome. Now it was time to wait.



Henry VIII's 1530 appeal for an annulment

As it turned out, the waiting was mercifully brief. Three months later I was notified that as far as Rome was concerned, my first two marriages never existed. Not long after, my wife and I were married—again—in a Catholic ceremony witnessed by a dear friend, a monsignor from New York. Since I'm not baptized, we do not have a sacramental marriage, but it is still recognized as a valid marriage by the church. And so my wife is once again officially a member in good standing of the Catholic community. My faith affiliation, such as it is, remains the same.

All in all, the process was not as harrowing as I had imagined. But I still think there must be a better way. From both a moral and a psychological perspective, the notion of annulment still strikes me as quite odd. With a stroke of the pen, the church has turned my wife's and my prior marriages into nullities. Wouldn't it be better to acknowledge the success and failure, the pride and the heartbreak, of a commitment and life together, rather than pretend it never happened? ■

Lloyd Sederer, *a psychiatrist, is the medical editor for mental health for the* Huffington Post.

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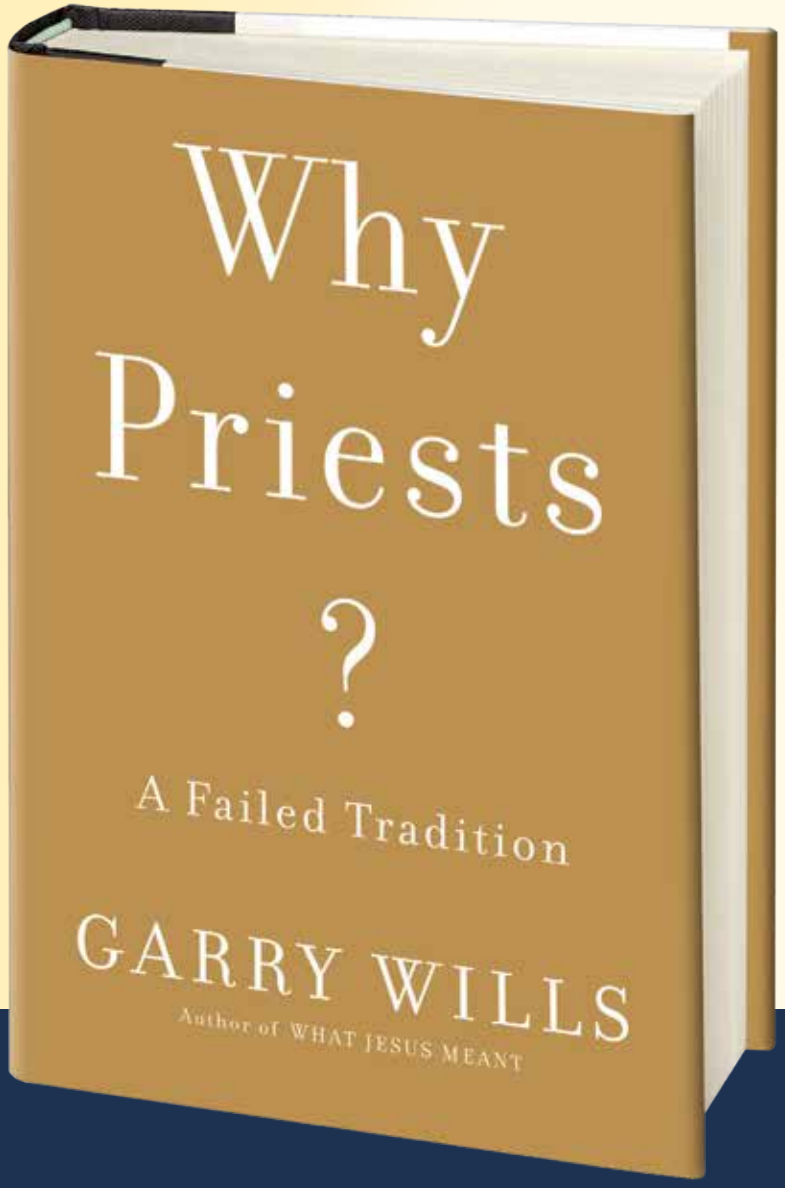

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