A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

Commonweal

FEBRUARY 8, 2013

MERCILESS

RICHARD ALLEVA ON 'ZERO DARK THIRTY'

PAUL LAURITZEN ON WILLIAM MAY

ANTHONY DOMESTICO ON JAMES WOOD

JERRY RYAN ON ORTHODOXY & DISSENT

$3.95 US/$4.50 CAN

www.commonwealmagazine.org

PASTORAL COUNSELING AND SPIRITUAL CARE

Come to **PREVIEW WEEK** and experience the Pastoral Counseling and Spiritual Care graduate programs at Loyola University Maryland.

Attend a class. Meet faculty. Answer the Call.

February 19-21

To register please visit www.loyola.edu/previewweek.

Fall term application deadline: **April 1**
(Applications received after deadline will be reviewed on a rolling basis.)

Columbia Graduate Center
8890 McGaw Road
Columbia, Md. 21045

LOYOLA
UNIVERSITY MARYLAND

410-617-7620

Commonweal

FEBRUARY 8, 2013 • VOLUME 140 • NUMBER 3

SHORT TAKE

ARTICLES

Ben Affleck in Argo

WARNER BROS.

UPFRONT

COLUMNISTS

SCREEN

ART

BOOKS

POETRY

THE LAST WORD

Founded in 1924
Commonweal

Editor
Paul Baumann

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

Magazine & Website Production
Tiina Aleman

Digital Editor
Dominic Preziosi

Copy Editor
Susanne Washburn

Digital Media & Marketing
KeriLee Horan

Editorial Assistant
Ryan O'Connell

Business Manager
James Hannan

Development
Christa A. Kerber

Poetry
Rosemary Deen

Screen
Richard Alleva, Rand Richards Cooper

Stage/Media/Television
Celia Wren

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

Subscription Information
212-662-4200

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

Publisher
Thomas Baker

Commonweal, [ISSN 0010-3330] *A Review of Public Affairs, Religion, Literature, and the Arts*, is published twenty times a year by Commonweal Foundation, 475 Riverside Drive, Rm. 405, New York, NY 10115. Telephone: (212) 662-4200. E-mail: editors@commonwealmagazine.org. Toll-free: 888-495-6755. Fax: (212) 662-4183. Advertising correspondence should be sent to Regan Pickett. POSTMASTER: send address changes to *Commonweal*, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834-9982.

Commonweal is indexed in Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, Catholic Periodical Index, Book Review Digest, and Book Review Index. Microfilm from Vol. 1, 1924, to current issues available through University Microfilm, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106 and on Microfiche from Bell & Howell, Wooster, OH 44691. *Commonweal* articles are also available at many libraries and research facilities on CD-ROM and in electronic databases. Serials Data program No.: ISSN 0010-3330. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional offices. Single Copy, $3.95. Yearly subscriptions, U.S., $59; Canada, $64; foreign, $69. Special two-year rate: U.S. $89; Canada, $94; foreign, $109. Annual rates for air-mail delivery outside U.S.: Western Hemisphere, $86; Europe, $91; other parts of the world, $101. All Canadian and foreign subscriptions must be paid in U.S. dollars by International Money Order or by check on a U.S. bank.

Cover design: Cecilia Guerrero Rezes
Cover image: from *Zero Dark Thirty*, Columbia Pictures

www.commonwealmagazine.org

LETTERS

The cost of health care

MEDICAL WASTE

In his column "Better, Cheaper, Easier" (December 21, 2012), Charles Morris extols the wonders of the U.S. health-care system. He is overly optimistic. The whole system is wildly overpriced—largely the result of government obstacles. I have been a practicing ophthalmologist for over forty years. Here are just five examples of waste in the system (there are many more):

1. Medicare suffers from government price fixing. Anytime there is price fixing, providers will try to get around the fixed prices. Every time you visit a medical office or have a procedure done, there is a code assigned to which a specific payment is attached. Doctors are besieged by "coding experts" who offer to teach them how to increase their income by clever coding. Many large medical practices have a coding expert on the payroll. The trick is to code an office visit or a procedure with the highest-paying code that can be justified and to write down in the patient's medical record whatever is needed to justify that code. There are thousands of codes. The system of codes should be simplified to ensure fair payments to all—not higher payments to better coders.

2. The average Medicare facility fee for cataract surgery performed in the hospital is $1,691. That money goes to a hospital where the surgery is performed, not to the doctor. That amount is 77 percent higher than the $953 Medicare pays for the same surgery performed in an outpatient clinic not owned by a hospital. Naturally, hospitals are buying up independent surgery centers as fast as they can. By a few strokes of a lawyer's pen, a hospital can convert such clinics into parts of the hospital in order to reap the larger fee. This practice is so egregious that Congress has held hearings on it. The obvious solution is to pay $953 as a facility fee no matter where the surgery is performed, yet Congress does nothing. There are 1.5 million cataract surgeries done yearly in the United States—most paid for by Medicare. Imagine the how much we could save by correcting this situation.

3. Cataract surgery is the most common operation performed on Medicare patients. Typically people develop cataracts in both eyes at the same time. In the United States, cataract surgery is almost never performed on both eyes at the same time. The rationale given for this is that if one eye gets infected it could spread to the second eye. But in Canada and many other countries, patients routinely have surgery on both eyes at the same time, and eye infections haven't been a widespread problem. The risk of infection in both eyes is less than the risk of dying in a car accident during the extra trips required for the second procedure. The real problem is financial. If surgery is done on both eyes on the same day, then Medicare pays the surgeon only half the normal fee for the second eye. Medicare should raise the fee for a second eye done the same day as the first. That would also cut the total facility fees in half. I haven't done eye surgery for the past seven years, but I do see patients and almost never encounter any who have had surgery on only one eye. Almost never does a person get a cataract in only one eye. Medicare could save a great deal by changing this fee structure.

4. A condition known as wet macular degeneration is treated mainly by two drugs. One costs about $100 per dose and the other costs about $2000 per dose. The inexpensive one, Bevacizumab (Avastin), has not been approved by the FDA be-

The *Commonweal* 2012 index is now available online at commonwealmagazine.org/indexes

continued on page 30

From the Editors

Change at the Pentagon

During his first term, President Barack Obama steered a middle course that displeased people on both extremes of the political spectrum. His health-care law eschewed the public option in favor of a private mandate. His stimulus package proved his socialism to some; to others, his fealty to Wall Street. His waffling during the fiscal-cliff negotiations had members of both parties asking whether he had a backbone. Now that Obama has decisively won reelection, they may have their answer. Its name is Chuck Hagel.

Hagel represented Nebraska in the U.S. Senate from 1998 to 2009. In many ways, his path to politics places him in what used to be the mainstream of the Republican Party. He started a business that made him rich. He ran an investment-banking firm. He even sits on the board of an oil company. But before all that he was a decorated infantryman who had volunteered to go to Vietnam. His experience as a veteran—and its influence on his views about sending troops into harm's way—is what makes Obama's choice of Hagel impressive and bold.

It's also what makes neoconservatives nervous. During the 2002 Senate debate over the resolution to authorize military action in Iraq, Hagel delivered a stirring, prescient speech warning of the unforeseen consequences of invading. Nevertheless, he voted for the resolution. Yet as the body count rose and the prospects for stability diminished, Hagel's doubts grew. By the time President George W. Bush called for a troop surge, Hagel had had enough. "We better be damn sure we know what we're doing, all of us, before we put twenty-two thousand more Americans into that grinder," Hagel said, and this time he backed up his words with his vote.

That dovish disposition has incurred the ire of prominent advocates of the Iraq war. Some have gone so far as to charge Hagel with anti-Semitism. His sins? He referred to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee as "the Jewish lobby." What he should have said, of course, was that AIPAC lobbies on behalf of Israel, not Jews. Others have accused Hagel of homophobia because in 1998 he called a Bill Clinton ambassadorial nominee "aggressively gay." Yet at the time he also said that being gay shouldn't disqualify someone from being an ambassador. Still, both comments were regrettable—and he has apologized.

Not that it mattered to Hagel's critics. They know that he is neither an anti-Semite nor a homophobe. No, those smears were preludes to the real battle over his skepticism about the use of U.S. military power and his refusal to pretend that Israel can do no wrong. Neocons don't like that he favors trimming the Pentagon's budget. They can't stomach that he is skeptical about unilateral sanctions against Iran and is willing to criticize Israel's right-wing government. Hagel's skepticism might make it harder for Israel to launch a preemptive strike against Iran, something that would inevitably draw the United States into another military conflict in the region. But what distresses Hagel's detractors most is his commitment to the idea that military force should be used only as a last resort. In other words, they see the Hagel nomination for what it is: a repudiation of the aggressive foreign policy that has kept the United States fighting wars for over a decade.

"They sort of think we should have just gone away," complains William Kristol, one of the most prominent neocons. If the neocons aren't about to go away, they might at least show some embarrassment at the spectacular failure of the misadventure they set in motion—a million Iraqis displaced, tens of thousands of civilians and nearly forty-five hundred U.S. troops dead. Instead, the country has to endure the continued self-justification of those who championed the most egregious foreign-policy blunder in a generation.

Thanks to the endorsement of New York Senator Charles Schumer, it seems the campaign against Hagel will fail. Yet Schumer's support appears to have come at a high price. Hagel now says he'll do everything in his power to make sure Iran doesn't develop nuclear weapons. Whether that means Hagel will support an Israeli strike or the use of U.S. military force remains to be seen.

Putting someone with Hagel's views in charge of the Pentagon could have a dramatic impact on how the United States uses its military power. After a first term in which he aggressively combated terrorism, Obama now has the credibility and flexibility to bring U.S. military and diplomatic initiatives into better balance. In picking Hagel the president is sending a clear message that it is time to reconsider the scope of U.S. military activity abroad. National security, one hopes, will no longer be synonymous with never-ending war. ■

January 22, 2013

Margaret O'Brien Steinfels

The Greatest

DICKENS'S NOVELS TELL HIS OWN STORY

Some years ago, I fell into a spirited argument about the greatest English-language novelist and novel. I declared for Charles Dickens and *David Copperfield*. Battling Dickens in the ring was Ms. George (*Middlemarch*) Eliot. Her corner man was Jim Finn, one of my esteemed predecessors at *Commonweal*. Meanwhile, promoters for Jane Austen, Henry James, Herman Melville, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and sundry others circled around, hoping to get their contender into the next bout. On and on we went in a Pickwickian spirit.

Whether or not Dickens deserves the title of greatest English-language novelist, his work constitutes our language's greatest autobiography. Within each of his fifteen multifarious novels is an account of some part of his actual life, the one he lived and the one he was constantly turning over in his mind, writing letters about, and discussing with friends.

I was reminded of this by the trove of books occasioned by the now concluding bicentenary of Dickens's birth (February 7, 1812). Among their topics: his novels, sketches, essays, journalism, plays, public oratory; his unrequited love followed by an unsatisfying marriage and distracted parenting of ten children; his liaison with Ellen Ternan, which caused a minor scandal; his civic agitation for prison, school, electoral, and every other kind of reform; his drawn out fights with publishers and crusade for copyright laws; his need to have income exceed expenses; his dinners, rollicking evenings with friends, and ceaseless walks around London exploring every nook and cranny. It was a life governed by endless deadlines, full of relentless activity and little sleep.

Claire Tomlin's *Charles Dickens: A Life* is one of several books supplying ample evidence that much of what he wrote was snatched from his own life—the sights, sounds, and people he encountered in his perpetual walking (sometimes twenty miles a day) and journalistic assignments. *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* began serialization in April 1836, shortly after Dickens had covered a by-election in Kettering for the *Morning Chronicle*. About that assignment, he wrote to his fiancée Catherine Hogarth, "we had a slight flare…just stopping short of murder and riot." Consult the Pickwickian account of the electoral contest between Samuel Slumkey and Horatio Fizkin in Eatanswill (Chapter XIII). The names and locale are fictitious but the events stop just short of murder and riot.

Martin Chuzzlewit features the hero's American sojourn; there he encounters the same boring, pompous, and ignorant citizenry, the same braggarts, frauds, and charlatans whom Dickens met in his 1842 tour of the United States.

Think of the boys adrift, Oliver Twist, Nicholas Nickleby, David Copperfield, Philip Pirrip (Pip), who rise from the ashes, the marshes, poverty and misfortune, overcoming daunting adversity to make their way in the world. All are variations on the traumatized young Dickens, pulled from school and sent to factory work pasting labels on jars of blacking at the age of twelve. Alas, one boy who does not survive his ordeal: little Paul Dombey, aged five; Tomlin calls him "a small Dickens." Paul's heartless father separates him from all he loves and sends him to Mrs. Pipchin's boarding house. This was Dickens's own experience at twelve. As he wrote to a friend: "It was from life, and I was there." He was there, too, in tears, as little Paul succumbs at the hands of Dickens, the novelist.

And there's more: Dickens's improvident father, John Dickens, like Wilkins Micawber in *David Copperfield*, spent time in Marshalsea, the notorious debtors prison (and the site for the tribulations of *Little Dorrit*). Could Nicholas Nickleby's distracted and somewhat addled mother have been modeled on Charles's own? Mrs. Jellyby, the mother of many in *Bleak House*, could only be the image of Dickens's wife, Catherine, who bore him more children than he wanted, though he hardly acknowledged his own role in their creation.

All writers of fiction make use of their own lives. In Dickens's case his "fictions" were his life. True, his characters and settings are so many and various, their reality drawn with such exuberant, wild, fantastical strokes, that we might imagine they exist in a sphere far from everyday experience. Not so. As these biographies show, his life was as exuberant, wild, and fantastical as his fiction—at times stranger than his fiction. He played out his personal dramas in his head, in stories, letters, plays, staged monologues, and public readings. Today, when the boundaries between autobiography, memoir, and novel have steadily diminished, why not consider that the greatest novelist in the English language is in fact its greatest autobiographer? ■

E. J. Dionne Jr.

Second Act

THERE IS NO THIRD

OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY PETE SOUZA

Barack Hussein Obama can begin his second term liberated by the confidence that he is already a landmark figure in American history. His task is not to manufacture a legacy but to leave his successors a nation that is more tranquil because it finally resolved arguments that roiled it for decades.

Whatever happens over the next four years, Obama will forever be our first African-American president, and our first biracial president. He has won two successive popular-vote majorities. Andrew Jackson and Franklin Roosevelt, both of them icons, are the only other Democrats who managed that.

Obama fought for and signed a sweeping health-care law, an accomplishment matched only by Lyndon Johnson's Medicare. He led the country out of the worst economic calamity since the Great Depression. Restoring growth will count for more on the historical scales than petty arguments over what his stimulus program achieved. He ended one unpopular war and is preparing to close another.

What he has not done is heal our national political distemper. Indeed, his very identity—yes, as a black man, but also as someone who is urban, highly educated, and culturally progressive—sometimes served to aggravate the divides in our body politic: between the North and the South, the rural and the metropolitan, the young and the old, the liberal and the conservative, the traditional and the modernist. And racism always lurked, barely below the surface, as another force pulling us apart.

The president cannot be blamed for how others reacted to him. But so many Americans, Obama included, hoped that his identity would allow him to have exactly the opposite effect: His victory in 2008 would be the occasion for putting aside our partisan rancor, our ideological rigidity, our bitter racial history. Obama wanted to be the agent of a United States of America in which the word "united" would become an accurate description of our polity.

It is a sign of just how divided we are that there is discord even on the question of how hard Obama worked to put discord aside. Many of his supporters believe he wasted far too much time trying to conciliate a Republican Party and a conservative movement that were unappeasable. Critics to his right claim he never understood them and never reached out to them. His program can be fairly described as moderate and market-oriented, yet conservatives insist it was and remains radical and statist.

Obama eventually decided he could govern only if he could first win a larger argument over the proper scope and central purposes of government. His reelection should have settled the matter. But will it?

Politicized redistricting and the concentration of Democratic votes in the nation's metropolises left the House of Representatives in Republican hands. Senate rules give his opponents further blocking power. His foes are even contemplating whether bringing the government to a halt and threatening the country's credit are legitimate means for winning a battle over budgets.

Paradoxically, the fact that Obama has shed any illusions about his unique gifts as a national healer will increase his capacity to help us leave behind many of the debates that have torn our political world asunder. Tempered by the struggles of his first term, he now seems more at ease declaring exactly what he is for and what he is seeking to achieve.

In doing so, he has already won some of the tax increases that long-term fiscal solvency requires. He has laid out proposals to curb gun violence that reflect what he wants, not what he calculates might pass. In the process, he has pushed Republicans who have genuine doubts about their party's sharp turn rightward to begin to pull it back, to vote for measures rejected by a majority of their colleagues, and to ponder whether there are better approaches to being conservative.

The president is now free to address the needs of the poor as well as those of the middle class. He can answer the aspirations of working people battered by economic change without fearing that promoting fairness could crater the financial system by disaffecting investors. He can set about proving that a decent level of economic security and social justice can actually foster entrepreneurial dynamism, risk-taking, and inventiveness. And he can demonstrate that judiciousness in using American power abroad is a precondition for preserving and enhancing it.

An Obama less burdened by what he was supposed to be has a far better chance of being the president he hoped to be. ■

Conor P. Williams

Jersey Boy

IS CHRIS CHRISTIE A NATIONAL CANDIDATE?

Months after the Republican Party's electoral flameout, analysts are still sifting for embers amid the ashes. New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, despite his act of heresy in praising Barack Obama for his response to Hurricane Sandy, has joined the predictable frontrunners for 2016. At first blush, it's hard to see what Christie brings to the table for the GOP.

Consider, in comparison, some of the other big names. Marco Rubio is a conservative demographer's dream, a living, breathing solution to the party's Latino, youth, and coolness problems. Jeb Bush, meanwhile, has the dynastic clout to go with his formidable bipartisan swing-state credentials. He has establishment connections to burn, and he has staked out legitimately moderate positions on immigration, education, and other key issues. Perhaps most important, both men are based in electoral-vote-heavy Florida, which looks to be a must-win for GOP presidential contenders.

On paper, Christie can't compete with these guys. His geographic credentials are negligible—the GOP isn't going to win in the Northeast with or without the New Jersey governor on the ticket. His supposedly "moderate" views consist more of ill-timed heterodox remarks than of substantive policy-making. And as a personality, it is hard to see how he matches up. He possesses neither Rubio's panache nor Bush's political savoir-faire. Yet recent polls show that Christie is extraordinarily popular—and it's not just a function of his Hurricane Sandy response. With his bruising, take-no-prisoners approach to public life, Chris Christie is running a singular experiment among American politicians. In an era dominated by message discipline and carefully targeted advertising campaigns, he has built a career shooting from the hip. Can it work?

Christie's playbook borrows at least a bit from John McCain's 2000 presidential primary campaign. That year, *Rolling Stone* sent writer David Foster Wallace on the trail with McCain's "Straight Talk Express." As usual, Wallace produced an essay as substantively striking as it was stylistically unconventional. "Why," he asked, "do these crowds from Detroit to Charleston cheer so wildly at a simple promise not to lie?"

Well, it's obvious why. When McCain says it, the people are cheering not for him so much as for how good it feels to believe him. They're cheering the loosening of a weird sort of knot in the electoral tummy. McCain's résumé and candor, in other words, promise not empathy with voters' pain but relief from it. Because we've been lied to and lied to, and it hurts to be lied to. It's ultimately just about that complicated: it hurts.

President Barack Obama and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie at the Brigantine Beach Community Center in Brigantine, New Jersey, Oct. 31, 2012

OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO BY PETE SOUZA

Wallace thought that McCain's strategy worked because Americans want so badly to believe in the beautiful idealism at the core of our political tradition, despite being constantly buffeted with evidence to the contrary. We want to believe that the perpetual cheapness and disappointment of our politics is the product of some sort of elite malpractice, rather than of ideological schism and structural malfunction.

If this was true twelve years ago, it's palpably more so today, when our yearning for honest idealism has only been exacerbated by the staggering moral, political, economic, and environmental problems facing the nation. We are heirs to a rich political tradition, yet our governing institutions are hopelessly paralyzed. This dissonance fuels the various "just fix it" movements popping up at the margins of mainstream American politics, which taken together represent a substantial crowd of voters who want someone forthright to cut through Beltway nonsense. These are people who believe that our political problems are actually much simpler than they appear—that we could solve them if only we cleared away the deception and the partisanship and, well, the politics.

This isn't the first time that this particular strain of resentment has surfaced in American politics. In the 1960s, segregationist Alabama Governor George Wallace famously derided the "pointy-headed intellectuals" muddying American democracy. Just over a century ago, the Knights of Labor insisted that lawyers, bankers, gamblers, and other immoral parasites were all that stood in the way of a better United States of America. The original American straight-talker, Teddy Roosevelt, accused "malefactors of great wealth" of being "careless of the working men, whom they oppress, and of the State, whose existence they imperil."

These—and other—American populists repeatedly argued that our gravest problems are solvable, if only we cut through the factors artificially distorting our politics. Today's populists are no different. Barack Obama, the Tea Party, and Occupy Wall Street have all tapped into the same vein of frustration, albeit in competing and often incompatible ways. Each promises that our gravest political challenges are the product of manipulation by various bad-faith actors: cynical leaders, big-spending politicians, corporate elites, radical partisans, and the like.

In this regard, Chris Christie's timing couldn't be better. Like McCain, he has captured a bit of public-image quicksilver. But he has come by his political truth-teller credentials differently. He possesses none of McCain's heroism. Rather, Christie has built his career around behaving unconventionally. He has defined himself as someone too concerned with problem-solving to bother with rhetorical window-dressing; as a guy who drives straight into controversy because it's the only way to "just fix" things. Unlike most of his colleagues, he doesn't appear polished enough to be a political creature. You're not going to catch smooth operators like Rubio or Bush engaging in a shouting match with malcontented law students, as Christie famously did last year at a town-hall meeting near Trenton. ("Let me tell you something," he railed at one interlocutor. "If after you graduate from law school you conduct yourself like that in a courtroom, your rear end's gonna be thrown in jail, idiot!")

A large subset of American voters, well aware that our political and fiscal challenges are actually brutal, wants to hear uncomfortable truths from its leaders. They'll forgive disagreement, inaccuracy, and even incompetence in a source they trust. Christie recognizes that voters want brash honesty, so he consciously crafts himself to sound that way. His apparent lack of filter is very likely itself a filter. But if off-the-cuff becomes an act, is it still off-the-cuff? Does consciously manufactured brazenness have the same political luster as the real thing?

What's clear is that this dynamic has given Christie substantial political freedom. Often his missteps come off as the frustrations of an honest man facing partisan ugliness, and his intermittent gaucheness is just the price of his earnestness. For disillusioned Americans dismayed to see politicians scrabbling for leverage amid meaningless slights, Chris Christie is a breath of fresh air.

This is a risky approach to politics. Tough-talking populism works wonders on squirrelly Beltway politicians, but it can backfire against less obviously dishonest opponents. It's one thing to lambaste feckless congressional Republicans for failing to hold a timely vote on federal disaster funding after Hurricane Sandy. But it's quite another to break with half a century of precedent, as Christie did in 2010, and refuse to reappoint one of New Jersey's sitting supreme court justices—in this instance the court's only African American—in an attempt to curtail court "activism."

At his best, Christie boldly calls out prevaricators for evading or masking problems; at his worst, he comes off as a reckless ideological bully. Nowhere is this clearer than in his battles over education policy. Christie strives mightily to frame himself as the champion of underserved kids against a manipulative teachers union. But shining a spotlight on ways that union negotiators distort political discourse and undermine good policy-making is easy; what's difficult is to enunciate a persuasive rationale for cutting the health and pension benefits of rank-and-file teachers. Teachers, after all, are popular. When Christie condemns union intransigence on stronger teacher accountability provisions, a growing number of voters nod along; but when he strays into attacking teachers and their "comfortable, staid, failed…methods," he undermines his populist image.

A look at Christie's critics shows that no one's really sure what to do with him. Conservatives view his Hurricane Sandy partnership with President Obama as a betrayal, but still can't bring themselves to excommunicate him. To some degree, conservative criticism only adds credibility to Christie's unconventional image and boosts his standing among liberals who see him as far less pernicious than alternative Republicans. He's not one of us, they think—but at least he's not Paul Ryan or Eric Cantor! Such crossover appeal perhaps explains why progressives take special aim at Christie. Last summer, *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman dismissed Christie's ballyhooed "Jersey comeback" as mere smoke and mirrors: the state retains one of the highest levels of unemployment in the country, Krugman pointed out, and its budget-gap reductions have been achieved in part by deferring mandated pension-fund contributions. Christie's populist style and bluster about "tough choices," Krugman charged, are nothing more than cover for "what [he] really wants…tax cuts for the wealthy."

It's way too early to know whether Christie can keep his high-wire act going until 2016, though a successful gubernatorial reelection campaign in New Jersey this fall would surely stoke more speculation. What's certain is that while Rubio, Bush, and other possible contenders—following Mitt Romney's example—build their brands upon rhetorical contortions designed to suit various political constituencies, Christie can (and will) respond to changing political and electoral circumstances in whatever manner he likes.

How far can an American politician get by building his image around opposition to image politics? The answer will have less to do with Chris Christie, ultimately, than with us. It remains to be seen if Americans are sufficiently frustrated with politicians-as-usual to take a flyer on such a brash and abrasive exception. But one way or another, by 2016 we ought to know whether Christie's forthright reputation was genuinely earned—or just another show. ■

Conor P. Williams *lives and writes in Washington, D.C. Follow him on Twitter: @conorpwilliams.*

Covenant Keeper

William F. May & the Crisis of Bioethics

Paul Lauritzen

I have had the good fortune to know a number of fine fiction writers over the years, and to a man (or woman) they always prayed for the crucial literary award that might gain them the readership their talent deserved; one joked ruefully that he would consider sacrificing an arm or a leg if it would get him included in the annual *Best American Short Stories* collection. No equivalent recognition exists for works on bioethics, but the editors of the *Hastings Center Report*—the premier journal in the field—once asked a list of prominent thinkers in the discipline to name the most important article published during the first fifteen years of the journal's existence. Only one author's name appeared more than once: William F. May. "Bill has added something to bioethics that almost no one else working in the field really possesses," says his friend Gilbert Meilaender, professor of theology at Valparaiso University. "He embeds his thinking about particular issues in a very rich, imaginative, and often witty sense of what it means to be human." "He's something of a genius at what he does," adds David Smith of Yale University's Interdisciplinary Center for Bioethics. "And courageous."

To appreciate May's influence during the formative years of bioethics, one need only read his 1971 essay "Attitudes to the Newly Dead" in the inaugural issue of the Hastings journal. The topic was the emerging issue of organ-donation policy, and May drew on an impressive array of sources—from Homer and Sophocles to the Brothers Grimm, Jung, and Unamuno—to urge caution about the routine salvaging of human organs. He argued that the attitude to the body embedded in public policy about organ donation holds consequences for *all* of bioethics, and that a utilitarian focus on practical consequences makes too narrow an approach for addressing issues of profound human significance. "While living," May wrote, "a person is identified with his body in such a way as to render the dignity of the two inseparable. A man not only *has* a body, he *is* his body." To think clearly about organ donation, we must acknowledge that the "association between self and body does not terminate abruptly with death." The view of the body articulated by May in this foundational essay went on to inform much subsequent work in bioethics, including work in Catholic sources. It is echoed in bioethics debates whenever anyone insists that the association between the body and the self is not necessarily terminated by persistent vegetative states, gamete donation, or abortion.

Although May is best known for his work in bioethics, he has made significant contributions to a range of disciplines, and has served as president of both the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the Society of Christian Ethics (SCE). His 2011 volume *Testing the National Covenant: Fear and Appetites in American Politics* was based on his address to the SCE in January 2003. Coming a mere fifteen months after the attacks of September 11, it was the first occasion for a president of the society to address the ethical issues raised by the U.S. government's response to terrorism in a post-9/11 world. May spoke of the twin dangers of tyranny and anarchy, and argued that fear of the latter had become the driving force of political discourse in the West—not merely since the attacks, but going back at least to the 1990s. Fear of anarchy—both political and cultural—had been growing for decades, and failure to recognize that fact was sure to distort America's response to terrorism.

Developing this theme in *Testing the National Covenant*, May quotes Flannery O'Connor's remark that "you know a

Paul Lauritzen *is a professor in the Theology and Religious Studies Department at John Carroll University. His new book,* The Ethics of Interrogation*, will be published by Georgetown University Press in May.* *This article has been funded by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation.*

people by the stories they tell," and goes on to explore how myth and story shape people both cognitively and morally. He is particularly interested in the stories we tell of good and evil. In May's view, to understand our responses to the threat of anarchy, we need to grasp the attraction of certain mythic stories that have shaped Western thought.

One such story derives from a religious dualism that posits two gods, not one—in effect making Satan coequal with God—and narrates a cosmic struggle between their rival kingdoms. In the Cold War era, this story molded much of the West's response to tyranny. Subsequently, as we have shifted from fear of tyranny to fear of anarchy, the contest between beneficent order and malevolent order has been recast as one between order and chaos. In turn, May asserts, our response to terrorism is now informed not by a dualism that misappropriates Genesis, but by the Babylonian creation myth in which "Marduk, a kind of sheriff deity and the enforcer of law and order, battles Tiamut, a formless monster issuing from turbulent waters, the symbol of primordial chaos."

The problem with the Babylonian creation myth as the shaping narrative of the struggle with terrorism, says May, is that Marduk has a taste for violence as well as a commitment to order. The myth thus "reminds us that a society threatened with disruption and chaos may suspend its self-restraints and rally around its police and militia for the sake of law and order." Opposed to imperial pretensions and an imperial presidency, May has written that in the struggle between the United States and terrorists—between Marduk and Tiamat—"the dragon's tail may show beneath the sheriff's uniform."

Bill May's lifelong attention to the temptations of Manichean thinking can perhaps be explained by the fact that he spent his formative years in two cities that were deeply divided—his birthplace of Chicago, with its old ethnic tensions, and Houston, where his family moved in 1938 when he was twelve, and where he was quick to perceive the uneasy dualism that marked the color line in a city where whites asserted absolute control.

Though May spent his early years in the Central time zone, his intellectual training and early career were strictly East Coast. He attended Princeton, where he was one of Paul Ramsey's first students. Ramsey went on to become one of the most important Christian ethicists of his generation, but he was just starting his academic career when May took his class as a sophomore. Yet Ramsey was already a memorable teacher. "Compared with the smooth, polished, seamless delivery of other professors in Ivy League attire," May would recall years later, "Ramsey came across as a theological calliope—full of snorts and harrumphs, throat clearings and chortles, bolts of laughter, and a constant reliance on a reiterated 'You see, you see,' as he gathered intellectual steam."

Working with Ramsey led May to Yale, where he completed a BD and PhD. During one of his breaks, he did

ASSUMPTION (DALÍ, 1956)

Her canopy conceals from me the clouds over Port Lligat.
One by one the desert's drawers are opened
and rifled through, releasing her remains in zeroes
or in vowels that look like them.

Suspended in air, sapped of life but saturated
with something more profound, like amber
or the barrier of sound being broken, she grasps the rood.
These are merely self-contained miracles.

That sound was heard by those far outside the city,
but for us—gathered around the wide sarcophagus
of her hair, the perfect mound of her flesh—

there was no din. Only a noiseless flash.
Then nothing. Then the terrible flowering
of her vanishing.

—Jeremy Glazier

Jeremy Glazier is Associate Professor of English at Ohio Dominican University and, through a grant from the Ohio Arts Council, was a 2012 summer fellow at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center.

summer theater in New York. It turned out that the most important role he would audition for was that of husband, for it was there that he met his wife, actress Barbara May. (Apparently he was well cast; the two have been married for sixty years.) From Yale, he went to Smith College, staying for fourteen years before being hired away to build the religious-studies department at Indiana University from the ground up. Not everybody was happy when May sought to include theologians within the religion department at a state school, but in response he simply asked, What sense did it make to have courses on Aquinas as an important part of a curriculum at a university where Aquinas himself would be ineligible for a tenure-track position? His characteristically sensible argument carried the day.

As May's research and writing turned increasingly to bioethics, he sought positions that would support those interests, spending five years at the Kennedy Institute at Georgetown University, then heading to Southern Methodist University as the first holder of the Cary M. Maguire University Professorship of Ethics. Colleagues from SMU recall the enormous impact May had on campus. One episode looms large. It involved a scandal that earned the SMU football program the "death penalty" for infractions of NCAA rules. In the university and the wider Dallas community the scandal was all-consuming. From 1981–84, the SMU Mustangs had the best record in college football. But in 1987, the NCAA cancelled SMU's football season, stripped it of scholarships, and imposed other devastating sanctions on the program for charges that included paying players and their families. The Mustangs did not have another winning season for more than twenty years.

May had been introduced as the new "University Professor of Ethics" just as the scandal broke, and he went on to play an important role in the university's effort to learn from the crisis. Asked to address the community in a town-hall meeting, he gave a talk that should be required reading on campuses with big-time athletic programs. Instead of demonizing athletics as some professors do, May sought to articulate a university's mission in light of the historical ideal of *mens sana in corpore sano*. "Ideally in the classroom," he said, "one hopes for active and vigorous minds in active and vigorous bodies producing active and vigorous citizens."

Student athletes can serve as role models in this regard, May argued, bolstering other students in their commitment to avoid passivity and sloth—and in doing so, can help make the university "resemble republican Rome and Athens more than imperial Rome." May advocated keeping college athletics, but insisted that athletic programs protect the goods of human play. "Play distinguishes human culture," he observed. "Play is the handmaiden of creativity and discovery. The good writer has learned to play with words; the painter, with pigment; the musician, with sound; the scientist, with alternative hypotheses." Similarly, college athletes "offer a poetry in motion that we all can enjoy." The play of mind and body, both on and off the field, is precisely what a university "must rightly encourage before young people put on the three-piece suit of the merely useful."

Such a balanced approach to the scandal at SMU resonated widely on campus, which is probably why May was asked to serve on the many search committees needed to replace various administrators who resigned or were fired in the aftermath. His coolness in a crisis suggests one of the more interesting themes in his work, one signaled by the subtitle of his most recent book: "Fears and Appetites in American Politics." May is extremely attentive to what we desire and fear, and especially those "runaway fears" that result when a "preoccupation with death and destruction" replaces "attentiveness before a good and nurturant God," as it has for many Americans. The antidote is what May calls "metaphysical nonchalance." That may sound vaguely stoic, but it isn't. Biblical tradition, May writes, advocates nonchalance not through detachment but through its opposite, a fundamental attachment to divine love. This primordial attachment to God's sustaining love enables "a capacity to take in one's strides life's gifts and blows."

It would be hard to overstate the significance to May's work of the belief that combating a corrosive fear of mortality is central to the moral life. This concern for identifying the dangers of an obsessive quest for security helps explain why Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor figures so prominently in his writings, and especially in his 1983 book *The Physician's Cove-*

nant. Introduced in a chapter on casting physicians in the role of a parent, May's version of the Inquisitor is not the sinister figure with "withered face and sunken eyes" that Dostoevsky described, but rather the arch-humanitarian, the concerned and overprotective parent. He weeps when we weep; he understands the fear of death that bears down on us. Like a parent who abhors seeing his child suffer, the Inquisitor seeks to hide suffering from us, to shield us from its terror. His ruling principle is the "avoidance of suffering and death," and his effort to avoid these evils "governs every action."

The parental metaphor for medicine is worth appropriating in some ways, but it is also dangerous, and May's reading of the Grand Inquisitor helps us see why. In the process it offers insight into some of the central moral issues raised by contemporary medicine, which May has explored in three important volumes in medical ethics, *The Physician's Covenant, The Patient's Ordeal*, and *Testing the Medical Covenant*. Describing these works as studies in medical ethics may mislead, conjuring images of an ethicist applying principles to medical dilemmas in order to derive particular conclusions. May insists that such a quandary-based approach to medical ethics, while important, is ultimately limited. And it is limited in a way that frustrates any attempt to understand medical issues in theological terms. Too frequently, May writes, those who seek to apply bioethical principles to cases fail to understand that religious narratives open a horizon against which the "believer can see silhouetted the commands, rules, virtues, and principles" that govern his or her life.

Keeping the narratives of the Christian tradition as the background for viewing rules of medical ethics puts bioethical conflicts in a new and illuminating perspective. Take, for example, prolife and prochoice positions. "One group abhors death and holds life sacred," May writes; "the other abhors suffering and values quality of life over life." His summary of these positions is succinct: "Both revere a creaturely good, not the Creator." So too with partisans in end-of-life controversies. In May's view, one group would have us do more than we should (insist on futile treatment), the other less (give a lethal injection rather than comforting those in pain). Both are missing what he sees as the good news of the gospel—namely, that suffering and death, while genuine evils, are not ultimate. The desperate resistance to suffering and death found in the writings of both prolife and prochoice advocates stems from a failure to understand that God's solidarity with the suffering and dying is ultimately liberating. It is precisely this solidarity that undergirds the religious optimism of May's "metaphysical nonchalance."

While May's appeal to religious narratives does indeed complement the application of rules and principles in bio-

ethics, some have asked whether such appeals are always appropriate. The influential ethicist James Childress of the University of Virginia has argued that the appeal to archetypal narratives can "obscure individual narratives and thus seriously distort what a particular patient is saying" in requesting or declining treatment. And then there is the fundamental issue of how well May's broadly humanistic approach meshes with the rigors of bioethics. "As a humanist, Bill does not write and speak primarily for the gatekeepers of the discipline but rather for the intellectually interested general public," his longtime friend and colleague, the theologian Charles Curran of SMU, comments approvingly. "His essays refer to sociologists and psychologists, to novelists and poets, to artists and politicians. He illuminates a deeper meaning, for example, by appealing to the differences between Athens and Sparta as well as the differences between formal French gardens and English gardens."

Another SMU colleague and friend, Dick Mason, notes that even students captivated by May's classes sometimes express puzzlement over why studying bioethics requires them to examine so many literary references. Some colleagues in bioethics have raised the same concern, even colleagues deeply sympathetic to what May is attempting to do. Gil Meilaender, who joined President George W. Bush's bioethics commission along with May, observes wryly that some might prefer a physician "of relatively impoverished literary or metaphysical insight...[to] someone who had as an undergraduate gone almost without sleep for a week while working through various interpretations of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor." The philosopher Joel Feinberg makes a similar point much more emphatically. Writing about May's essay "Attitudes to the Newly Dead," Feinberg lumps May together with Paul Ramsey, who also argued against routine harvesting of body organs; both, he says, "approach these urgent questions more in the manner of literary critics debating the appropriateness of symbols than as moralists. One wants to remind them forcibly that while they distinguish among symbols and sentiments, there are people out there suffering and dying."

It's worth recalling, along these lines, how President Bush's Bioethics Council was criticized for construing bioethics too expansively. When the council's first meeting was devoted to a discussion of Nathaniel Hawthorne's story "The Birth-Mark," the chairperson, Leon Kass, was excoriated in some circles. Writing in the *New Yorker*, Jerome Groopman complained that beginning the council's work by reading a piece of fictional literature was a way of sneaking theological assumptions into the group's deliberations. Echoing Feinberg, Groopman tartly expressed his hope that the council would "help shape a medical guideline that is based on fact, not on literature or aesthetics—one that distinguishes real science from science fiction."

Groopman might have understood the point of beginning the council's work with Hawthorne had he read the introduction to the session that Kass asked May to prepare. In it May acknowledged that "novelists do not bake bread or write legislation," but insisted they can help policy-makers and ethicists understand the human dimensions of the issues to which their work attends. Take, for example, the Hawthorne tale, which chronicles a scientist's obsession with his wife's single imperfection, a birthmark on her left cheek, and his compulsion to remove it. "Hawthorne tells us that the birthmark is imprinted on her left cheek," May writes, "the side on which the heart itself resides, the very fount and core of life." Giving in to his dream of perfection, the scientist removes his wife's birthmark, with fatal results. "Ultimately, he cannot perfect her," May observes; "he cannot remove the mark of mortality without removing her from life." Hawthorne's narrative offered the council a salutary reminder about the danger of Promethean ambitions—an appropriate caution, May argued, for a council taking up the issue of embryonic-stem-cell research.

I for one was never convinced that the quick dismissal of using literary sources was warranted. Nevertheless, there is a legitimate concern in the sort of impatience expressed by Groopman, one that applies to May's work generally. John Evans has articulated the concern nicely in his recent book *The History and Future of Bioethics*. Contrasting public-policy bioethics with cultural bioethics, Evans argues that, if the two are confused, the profession of bioethics will suffer. Indeed, he suggests that those who, like May, engage in cultural work in the field should stop calling themselves bioethicists altogether.

May would probably be happy to call himself a theological ethicist rather than a bioethicist, but he would continue to insist that attention to literature and the arts, informed by a theological vision of human life and history, can assist us in thinking about the difficult issues raised by biotechnology. The problem is that May's form of cultural bioethics is in fact countercultural in profound ways. Consider, for example, the theme that is arguably at the core of his work—namely, covenant. In book after book, article after article, May turns to the contrast between covenant and contract to delineate his views.

His account of covenant is deeply appealing. Drawing on the biblical narratives of God's covenant with Israel, May argues that the metaphor of covenant can structure human-to-human interaction in important ways. For example, he views the theme of covenant as central to traditional views of professional life, in which the professional is covenanted with his clients. Covenants are responsive; they emphasize exchange and reciprocity. They are personal in that those who are covenanted do not meet entirely as strangers. And while contracts are minimalist, encouraging a quid pro quo between parties who meet as self-interested strangers, covenants stress mutual giving and receiving, emphasizing relationship, rather than choice, as the basis of exchange.

Given his literary bent, it is not surprising that May illustrates the difference between contract and covenant by

reflecting on the differences between Ernest Hemingway's fiction and that of William Faulkner. According to May, Hemingway "prizes technique as a shield against ties," and his characters typically remain solitary even in the midst of social gatherings. By contrast, Faulkner's novels and stories create a tightly bonded world. Even the stylistic differences between Hemingway and Faulkner mirror the differences between contract and covenant. Hemingway's stripped-down prose and precisely clipped dialogue suggest a legal document; Faulkner's expansive, sprawling, relationally dense and allusive sentences are thick with meaning and redolent of the sort of unruly family gatherings where responsibilities are real, even if they are not spelled out. Drawing out this distinction between covenant and contract, May seeks to show how the shift from covenant to contract has impoverished our sense of public responsibility. In *Beleaguered Rulers* (2001), he examines professions including law, medicine, ministry, and education to suggest that when professional responsibility is understood in contractual rather than covenantal terms, a moral minimalism detrimental to the common good sets in.

This is a powerful analysis; yet the very situation May bemoans raises a serious problem for his work. For the fact of the matter is that in almost every area of American life, the contractual model of human affairs dominates. From campus classrooms to corporate boardrooms, whether studying Thomas Hobbes or worshiping Steve Jobs, Americans embody and enact the "possessive individualism" of contract thinkers. Alas, we are a nation of Jake Barneses, and not Isaac McCaslins. May's advocacy of certain policies, whether in medicine, business, law or government, is formed against a backdrop of assumptions about the best way to organize our communal life; strip away those assumptions, and his policy recommendations may seem less plausible. There is also the question of whether the notion of covenant itself can generate the policy positions May identifies with it. As the late bioethicist K. Danner Clouser wrote about May's attention to covenantal relationships, "The focus ends up on the inner self—the agent's philosophy of life—more than on what actions are morally acceptable."

As a writer May often sounds prophetic; while he is not given to the thundering jeremiad of a Hebrew prophet, there's no mistaking that his is a corrective vision, put forth by a man used to swimming against the cultural tide. But his work is no mere flailing against the undertow of contemporary society. In *The Patient's Ordeal* he notes that moralists often "pay too little attention to the elements of rhythm and tempo in life." May himself certainly cannot be accused of this neglect. His work hums with the beauty (and darkness) of everyday life, in part because of its often poignant subject matter—an addict's struggle with addiction, a burn patient's struggle for rebirth in a body scarred by flames—but also, and importantly, because he writes so beautifully. May's colleague, Charlie Curran, describes him as "a sculptor of words," a writer who chisels his manuscripts with painstaking care until the power and beauty of his ideas emerges in elegant prose.

I had the chance to relate this compliment to May, one afternoon on the deck of his summer home looking out over the White Mountains in New Hampshire, and when I did, I saw the self-deprecating humor so many of his colleagues had mentioned. "Yes, I suppose so," he said of Curran's remark; "sculptors do work very slowly." A bit later, when I asked him to confirm that he had received a standing ovation for his SCE presidential address, he observed that "they might have been stretching." At eighty-five May continues to wield a sharp and quick wit, one often directed at his own foibles.

From his deck one used to hear the keening music of the saw blades at the mill in nearby Berlin, but, like many of the region's pulp and paper mills, it's been closed. As the mill jobs have disappeared, the area has fallen on hard times. Still, there is a quiet dignity in these mountains, and the residents who remain trust in the promise of the place. As May might put it, theirs is a covenant, not a contract with the future. I doubt there is a position of poet laureate in Randolph, New Hampshire. If there were, Bill May would be an ideal choice. The unadorned power of his writing aptly reflects the natural beauty of this part of the world. And like spending time in the White Mountains, dwelling for a while in May's inspired work renews the spirit and fosters hope for what lies ahead. ■

Orthodoxy & Dissent

Truth & the Need for Humility

Jerry Ryan

St. Pius X, in his encyclical *Vehementer* (1902), wrote: "By its very nature the church is a society of unequals; it is composed of two categories of persons: the pastors and the flocks. Only the hierarchy moves and directs...the duty of the flock is to let itself be governed and submissively carry out the orders of those who direct them." Such a simplistic understanding of the church would seem to have been supplanted by the declarations of Vatican II, as well as by the social and cultural changes that have taken place in the century since *Vehementer*'s promulgation. When it comes to the church's teachings about sexual morality, however, this clericalist view is still very much with us. Some still believe that everything the church has ever taught about sex is universal, timeless, rooted in the very nature of things. On this view, once these moral teachings are questioned, their dogmatic foundation is weakened and everything falls apart. Any bishop who wants to remain in good grace with the Vatican is obliged to uphold these teachings in his pastoral directives. For others, the church's moral teachings are unreasonable, anachronistic, even hypocritical. On their view, Catholic sexual morality should adapt to important changes in contemporary culture. There is a swelling discontent among the laity with an ecclesiastical authority already compromised by the sexual-abuse scandal. Such radical differences of perspective have lately turned the church into a battlefield where the opposing troops hurl anathemas at one another from their trenches.

Pope Pius X

It hasn't always been the moral rigor of the church's teachings that provoked dissent. In other periods of the church's history, dissent arose in reaction to a perceived laxity on the part of church authorities. Bishops were accused of watering down Christian moral obligations and tolerating pagan adulterations of the gospel. In fact, most of the great heresies originated as criticisms of the church's excessive tolerance—from the Donatists, who opposed the reception of lapsed Christians back into the church, to the Cathars, who aspired to an unrealistic purity, to Reformers who began by opposing indulgences and ended up rejecting the sacramental channels of grace. Such rigoristic dissent sometimes spurred reform and purification within the church, but too often it occasioned schisms and aberrations of zeal that could have been avoided had there been a minimum of humility on both sides. In the past, as in the present, dissent led to a hardening of positions with unintended consequences.

To understand dissent, you first have to understand authority. Authority in the church must be based on truth. Episcopal authority is not the *source* of truth, as some would have us believe. "What is truth?" The question posed by Pilate was left unanswered by Truth Himself who stood before him, humiliated, in the praetorium. We too humiliate Truth when we abase it to our level and pretend to have power over it. Truth is a divine name and to pretend to possess it, individually or collectively, is to manufacture an idol. We can no more claim to possess truth than we can claim to possess justice. And this holds for the church's pastors, as well as for their flock. For Christians, truth is Someone who possesses *us*, Someone who reveals as much of Himself to us as we can bear. It is this self-revealing Truth who founds authority in the church. The role of the magisterium is to maintain the purity of revelation by warning against aberrations without denying or minimizing the elements of truth behind them. The magisterium might be infallible in what it affirms, yet what it affirms is often just one aspect of a complex reality whose components are still not fully understood. In pulling out the weeds, there is the danger of uprooting the good grain, and this has often happened in the past. Examples abound. In the wake of the Enlightenment, as Rome felt threatened by anticlericalism and feared the disappearance of social structures that were supposed to reflect God's will, popes condemned democracy

Jerry Ryan *is a frequent contributor to* Commonweal.

and liberty of conscience. The church, individually and collectively, is forever *docens et discens*, teaching and learning. To deny the possibility of further elucidation of doctrine is blasphemous. It is tantamount to pronouncing the church dead, no longer vivified by the Spirit nor tending toward an ultimate manifestation still to come, when all that has been hidden will be revealed. The reception and assimilation of God's word by the pilgrim church will forever be partial and variable. It will depend partly on psychological, social, and historical circumstances. Every cultural cycle, every scientific advance, can serve to deepen our understanding of revelation, to illuminate one or another of its aspects. There is, however, an objective deposit of faith, constantly elucidated through the ages, to which the blood of martyrs has borne witness. Any development in the church is made possible only by what has preceded it, yet the intoxication of a novelty often leads to a rejection of what went before.

Dissent can be a sign of vitality; it can draw out the latent riches of revelation. The scribe versed in the affairs of the Kingdom will continually bring forth old things and new. Rather than automatically suppressing it, therefore, the magisterium should treat it with cautious respect, remembering that the Spirit is still at work, and the church still a work in progress. Rigidity and narrowness of vision can lead to the sin against the Spirit—and this sin can be a collective one.

Today, the most acute problems of dissent usually have to do with the church's moral teachings. Traditional Catholic moral theology generally abstracts from concrete historical and social contexts and considers not particular men and women, but "human nature" faced with hypothetically clear-cut options. Human nature, however, does not exist apart from real human beings, who must act in situations full of ambiguity. Very often we find ourselves in "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situations, where even the best option may not seem to be a good one. Pastoral common sense usually (but not always!) takes this complexity into consideration, but the official teachings of the church continue to define good and evil in terms of black and white, with little nuance or compassion, thus alienating many from the sacramental sources of grace.

Of course, the church must maintain the sublimity of the Christian vocation, which surpasses our ordinary human capabilities. Were the church to reduce the exigencies of sanctity to what is supposed to be realistic, it would betray its mission. "Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect." St. Thomas tells us that we fulfill this precept by *tending toward* perfection. Weighed down by individual and collective sin, faced with the complexities and ambiguities of ordinary experience, we can only tend toward perfection in a very imperfect way. Moreover, the emphasis on this or that aspect of the moral teachings of the church tends to shift from one time and place to another, and an exag-

SEMI-ABSTRACT PORTRAIT OF STUDENT DRIVER

Head down but seeming to bob, an eye
on either side of the road, is the gaze
and the profile of the student driver,
scrutinizing the green turn-signal arrow.

Bright blue eelshapes of shame at twice
already flunking writhe from his temples,
cutting across the basically competent
peach field of his forehead, the wise

mustard lobe of caution dabbed upon
the side of his bulbous triangular head.
It might strike the viewers as strange
that they can see both his feet, right

at the bottom of the picture. Two dark
smears on top of two dark smudges.
Those are black work shoes. Those
are the accelerator and brake. He still

sometimes drives with one foot on each
pedal, despite the warnings of the hidden
instructor. But not now. Now, he waits,
still, unmoving, seemingly forever at a red

light, trapped in the squiggly brushstrokes
of a left-turn lane, destiny halted due to
potential traffic. But perhaps if they look
away, these nosy spectators, wet clumps

of museum panini caught in their smiles,
the signal will change, he will gather his
confidence, and the road will unfold past
the frame, over the walls, into braver worlds.

—John F. Buckley

John F. Buckley's Sky Sandwiches, Poet's Guide to America *(with Martin Ott), and his chapbook* Leading an Aquamarine Shoat by Its Tail *were released in fall 2012.*

gerated stress on one set of moral values often leads to the neglect of others equally important. Here, too, there is room for legitimate dissent. The conflicts that take place in the human heart are seldom as simple as the church's official teachings would have us believe. The problem isn't so much what the church proclaims as *how* it proclaims the truths of the faith and applies them to concrete situations. We are asked to *think* with the church (*sentire cum ecclesia*), but it is equally important for us to *love* as the church has been called to love. For the church is *mater* as well as *magistra*, and a mother listens compassionately to her children. Thinking or loving, the church's model is Christ, who imposed himself on no one and took upon himself the sins of all.

What is especially disconcerting is that those who speak in the name of the church have often excused the church's past sins and errors by invoking considerations—historical conditions, the lack of a good alternative—denied to individual Christians living now. Is there not a double standard here? The "dispensers of light" are as much in need of mercy as their flocks are.

The safekeeping of the deposit of faith and the upholding of the Christian moral code are confided to the church's hierarchy. The bishops are not, however, the exclusive owners of the spirit of discernment. Historically, this gift has often been manifest in the little ones of God, in the "sensus fidelium." It is precisely this charisma that stimulates the church's growth in wisdom and in grace. There is a necessary tension between the function of the hierarchy and the prophetic instinct of the people of God. That tension could and should be fruitful, but in reality it is often bitter and sterile. It might well be that the prophetic élan in the church is especially at work in the poor and the unrecognized, in the little ones to whom is revealed what is hidden from the wise and mighty. One of the great contributions of liberation theology has been to remind the church of the privileged place of the poor in the Kingdom of God.

It might be well to remember that, during a period of great confusion following the Council of Nicaea in the fourth century, imperial decrees, confirmed by local councils of bishops, imposed Arian beliefs. According to St. Jerome "nearly all the churches in the whole world, under the presence of peace and the emperor, are polluted with the communion of the Arians." Even Pope Liberius, bowing to pressure from the emperor, communicated with the Arians and excommunicated the defenders of Nicaea. The faith professed at Nicaea was conserved by the laity and parish priests, while the great majority of the hierarchs maneuvered, quibbled, and compromised.

It is not enough for the church's hierarchy to praise the fidelity of lay Catholics; it must also be willing to learn from them. And that requires bishops to acknowledge humbly that they don't yet know everything about the will of God—that it is still revealing itself to us, and sometimes surprising us. The bishops, like their flocks, are still pilgrims on the way. Like the rest of us, they should be looking for signs ahead. ■

Elizabeth Kirkland Cahill

Gained in Translation

'CROSSING BORDERS: MANUSCRIPTS FROM THE BODLEIAN LIBRARIES'

The medieval manuscripts currently on view at Manhattan's Jewish Museum in "Crossing Borders: Manuscripts from the Bodleian Libraries" are stunning in their beauty. The exhibit, which draws from the superb holdings of Oxford's famed library, includes paintings and printed books in addition to the manuscripts, situating them within the historical context of Christian Hebraism, the Christian study of the Hebrew Bible, and rabbinic sources. This scholarly movement flowered in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and enjoyed a resurgence in the sixteenth, as Protestantism took hold throughout Europe. The fruits of the intellectual and artistic exchange among Christians, Jews, and Muslims are displayed in abundance throughout this small but splendid exhibit.

The collection pays eloquent tribute to the sustained vision of a great library. Thomas Bodley was a diplomat, humanist, and enthusiastic Christian Hebraist who considered a Hebraica collection an essential part of the new library he established in Oxford in 1602. Bodley's vision has been carried on over the centuries with help from such luminaries as librarian Benjamin Kennicott, an eighteenth-century English Hebraist who acquired the lavishly illuminated medieval Hebrew Bible that bears his name; Matteo Luigi Canonici, a Jesuit whose collection, obtained in 1817, was the largest single purchase of manuscripts ever made by the library; and David Oppenheimer, an eighteenth-century rabbi who stored his huge private library at his father in-law's house in Hanover, Germany, to avoid the censorship imposed on Hebrew texts in Prague.

The works shown here, though not all religious, constitute a garden of heavenly delights. In the first room, the transition from scroll and rotulus (a vertical rather than horizontal scroll) to the highly portable codex in the late first century—a technological advance that early Christians were quick to adopt—is amply attested by fragments of a Torah scroll, a tenth-century rotulus written on both sides, and codices of various sizes. The tidy columns of uncial letters in a late-sixth or early-seventh-century Latin Vulgate are strikingly juxtaposed with the sprawling Syriac script of John's Gospel from the Peshitta, the fifth-century Syriac Bible. There is a

Kennicott Bible, scribe: Moses ibn Zabara, artist: Joseph ibn Hayyim, commissioner: Isaac, son of Solomon di Braga, Corunna, Spain, 1476. Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford

IMAGES COURTESY OF THE JEWISH MUSEUM

large Hebrew Bible open to a diagram of the Temple as delineated in Ezekiel 40–48, with the River of Paradise a vertical streak of blue running up the page. Nearby is the commentary on the Prophets by the medieval rabbi Rashi—the decorative arrangement of the text itself an object of beauty. A Hebrew Psalter from the early thirteenth century is extensively annotated in Latin and French in the margins, a legacy of a lively personal engagement with the text that is increasingly lost to us in an electronic age.

Examples of cross-cultural conversation proliferate. They reflect the circumstances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when Christian Hebraists turned to Jewish scholars for help with textual interpretation, Jewish scribes commissioned Christian artists to illustrate Hebrew manuscripts, and both groups interacted with Muslim culture. Thus one finds a New Testament in Arabic; beautiful samples of "carpet" pages in Jewish and Muslim texts; and—fairest of all—the Kennicott Bible, a sumptuously illuminated manuscript created in fifteenth-century Spain by a Jewish scribe and a Jewish artist who drew on Christian, Islamic, and popular motifs. The Bible is open to the *Sefer Mikhlol* ("Book of Completeness"), the comprehensive grammatical treatise of David Kimchi, a thirteenth-century French Hebrew scholar; the Hebrew script is contained within four orderly Islamic horseshoe arches. Nearby the visitor can scroll through the entire Kennicott Bible by means of mounted iPads, a beneficent marriage of new technology and ancient text.

Holkham Hebrew Bible, printed in Naples by Joshua Solomon Soncino, 1491 or 1492. Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford

Two of the exhibit's biggest gifts are wrapped in the smallest packages. The first is a tiny siddur, or Jewish book of prayers, measuring roughly 2x2.5 inches, one of the smallest items in the Bodleian's collection. The second is a marvelous micrographic Psalter, composed in minute and decoratively arranged script. With a magnifying glass (helpfully stowed in a bin near the door), one can just make out the final verse of the Psalter, *kol haneshamah tehallel Yah* —"Let everything that has breath praise the Lord"—engendering a lovely tension between the psalm's tiny text and its all-encompassing sentiment.

But the exhibit's wonders come in all sizes and shapes. I was delighted to find a breviary from fifteenth-century Ferrara, graced by ornate floral decoration with a historiated initial "E" showing the Jewish King David seeking warmth from the young maiden Abishag, as recounted at the start of 1 Kings. The Holkham Hebrew Bible, produced in Naples in 1492, displays the opening verses of Genesis, the page illustrated with a woodcut borrowed from a Christian printer but reversed to accommodate the right-to-left Hebrew script. In another room I happened upon three medieval volumes of Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*, all open to the same page—one in Latin, one in Hebrew, and one in Arabic.

Cross-cultural exchange may also entail the refashioning of a text for

a different cultural and linguistic audience. *Kalila and Dimna*, on display here, is the title of a collection of Sanskrit fables translated into Arabic in the eighth century. The collection made its way to the Iberian Peninsula, where it was translated into Hebrew in the early thirteenth century, and eventually into Latin. In 1281, the Spanish Jew Isaac ben Solomon ibn Sahula wrote a collection of stories in rhymed prose to replace the original fables with a Hebrew original, which he titled *The Fable of the Ancient*—and, in the coup de grâce, the illustrations in his volume drew on Christian models. So we have an Indian folk genre with Arabic influence adapted to Jewish literary purposes with a markedly Christian aesthetic influence.

As its title suggests, the exhibit wants to emphasize the enhanced understanding that grows from the activities of cross-cultural exchange, whether collaborating, borrowing, rewriting, or translating. Alas, irenic collaborations among artists are all too often obscured by the cruel facts of history. Sixteen years after the completion of the Kennicott Bible, for instance, the Jews were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula; the Holkham Hebrew Bible was created in Naples in 1492, and within twenty years the Jews were banished from that kingdom, too. Addressing this reality would have been outside the exhibition's scope. But the question hangs in the air.

Perhaps it is the case that calligraphy, like poetry, "makes nothing happen," as Auden famously observed in his tribute to Yeats. In our day, after all, hopeful cross-cultural collaborations like the ones limned in this exhibit are just as routinely dashed by "real world" events. Witness the "Bridge Project," the joint effort of an Israeli Jew, an Australian Christian, and a Turkish Muslim who composed a musical olio called *Three Waves Under the Bridge* (think Turkish rhythms, Western strings, and a bit of klezmer) by means of digital file-sharing and Skype rehearsals. Within six months of the project's completion in May 2012, Hamas was sending rockets into Jerusalem and the Israelis were once again conducting an aerial campaign against Gaza.

Is it naïve to hope that artistic collaboration might spur political reconciliation? The exhibit at the Jewish Museum neither asks nor answers this question, and the historical track record is scarcely promising. But by showing how scribes, illuminators, and craftspeople of various cultural and religious stripes engaged in a dialogue across boundaries of all sorts, the curators of "Crossing Borders" have focused our attention on a little point of light that still shines across the centuries. In a world of darkness, this marvelous exhibit stands as an illuminating reminder of possibility. ■

Elizabeth Kirkland Cahill, *co-author (with Joseph Papp) of* Shakespeare Alive!*, is a 2010 graduate of the Yale Divinity School and a frequent contributor.* *Funding for this article was provided by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation.*

Kalila and Dimna*, in Arabic, 1354. Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford*

Richard Alleva

Hide & Seek

'ARGO' & 'ZERO DARK THIRTY'

If you knew only the plots of *Argo* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, you might conclude that they are sibling movies. Both are based on actual events—respectively, the rescue of U.S. embassy staff during the 1979 Iran hostage crisis and the hunt for Osama bin Laden. Both are tributes to CIA tenacity and ingenuity, and both were made by expert directors acclaimed for thoughtful thrillers—Ben Affleck (*The Town*) and Kathryn Bigelow (*The Hurt Locker*), both of whom were denied Oscar nominations in January, though the movies themselves received several nominations in other categories. Finally, both movies mix fiction with fact. But when you actually see the films, you discover they belong to different artistic universes.

Argo is a singularly ingratiating thriller. When the CIA discovers that some of the U.S. embassy's staffers in Tehran have been given secret asylum by the Canadian ambassador, agent Tony Mendez is authorized to organize their escape by disguising them as Canadian filmmakers scouting locations for a cheesy science-fiction epic. Mendez enlists the aid of an over-the-hill producer (an amalgamation of several movie people who aided Mendez), played by Alan Arkin, and makeup man John Chambers (a well-known Oscar-winner who worked on the *Planet of the Apes* series), played by John Goodman. The Hollywood people are glad to show their patriotism in such a practical way, but they are also cynically amused by the fact that, in a town thriving on bluff, they can now do good precisely by perpetrating movieland chicanery. Goodman, his craggy face aglow with mischief, and Arkin, his darting eyes and volatile voice never so well employed, turn this thriller into a near-comedy. But Affleck, who in addition to directing the film also plays Mendez, never lets the comedy swamp the suspense. It's a beautifully modulated movie.

The trapped embassy staffers aren't vividly characterized. If they had been, *Argo* would have been more like another Alan Arkin film about hostages, *Four Days in September*. That 1997 movie was claustrophobic, intense, anguished. But *Argo*'s lively script, written by Chris Terrio and based on a memoir by the real Tony Mendez, concentrates instead on the rescuers and their frenzied, often comic manipulations, and this keeps the movie light, rapid, and exhilarating. Here are con artists we can root for in good conscience, and their unpretentious, roguish brand of patriotism makes us cheer their scheme on all the more. At the end of some of the best escape movies—*Grand Illusion, Midnight Express, The Great Escape*—you say "whew!" At the end of *Argo*, you might want to shout *¡Olé!*

You won't want to shout anything at the end of *Zero Dark Thirty*; in fact, you may feel like crawling out of the theater under cover of night. The title is a military term for half-past midnight and therefore stands for the darkness and secrecy in which certain operations are carried out. Beginning with scenes of torture and concluding with an assassination that includes the killing of a woman and the intimidation of children, this is a harsh, grinding film, an estimable work but not exactly an enjoyable one. Should it have been? I think its very dankness proceeds from its creators' courage and conscientiousness.

Bigelow and scriptwriter Mark Boal have been accused of justifying torture because, in their film, the threat of torture to a man already disenchanted with Al Qaeda leads to information about a courier who, in turn, leads the CIA to bin Laden. Understandably, many of those who make this accusation want to hear that torture never works and so can be forsworn without cost. But what if torture had led to bin Laden's death? Would that mean it must be defended? Shouldn't we reject a successful abomination?

Rather than telling us that the end

Jessica Chastain in Zero Dark Thirty

COLUMBIA PICTURES

justifies the means, Boal and Bigelow create the character of Maya (based on several CIA agents, male and female), who will use any means necessary to kill bin Laden. Maya begins her tour of duty in Pakistan, sickened by the torture she witnesses. But she refuses to distance herself from it; she insists on being in the room where it's happening rather than watching it on a monitor, as the head interrogator recommends. Her honesty about what she's getting into keeps her close to the victim's agony. More than close—it makes her complicit: she carries over the water used to half-drown the suspect.

We think of empathy as leading naturally to mercy, but Bigelow and Boal implicitly deny this in their portrayal of Maya. She does feel a kind of empathy for the gasping man being waterboarded, but this does not move her to try to spare him. One of the many virtues of Jessica Chastain's performance as Maya is that she makes this emotional self-smothering visible. Does the movie applaud Maya's steeliness? The answer lies not in the results, not in the brute fact of bin Laden's corpse, but in the treatment of the events that led to that death. In short, in the film's style. In art, style does not coat morality and immorality. It is the morality.

And here is what puts *Zero* in a different universe from *Argo*. There is nothing jaunty, swashbuckling, or comical in its treatment of the mission to kill bin Laden. It soon becomes clear that this mission is such a wearying, soul-scarring process that it requires a kind of fanaticism to see it through. Mere ambition and devotion to duty aren't enough. Maya's initial collaborator, Dan, is efficient at brutal interrogation, but he's also drained by it and finally seeks a transfer. It's the perpetually wound-up, unsmiling Maya who's right for the job.

Though Chastain's performance is one of the film's strengths, the screenplay's characterization of Maya is somewhat blurred. Chastain's burning stillness convinces from moment to moment, yet the overall impression is one of opaqueness. Unlike Affleck's Mendez, Maya has no backstory and there's no way to picture her apart from her work. She is her work: not so much a real person for the audience to applaud or deplore as a fury set in motion by 9/11. Two-thirds of the way through the movie, the script backs away a bit from its conception of Maya by creating a friendship between her and another agent, Jessica (played by the always appealing Jennifer Ehle), which ends with the latter's death in the notorious terrorist strike on Camp Chapman. This loss is supposed to deepen Maya's determination—"I'm gonna smoke everyone involved in this op, and then I'm gonna kill bin Laden"—but wasn't she always this determined? Is Boal suddenly trying to make Maya more "human" by having her avenge a personal loss rather than a national disaster? I got the impression of suspenders being fastened on the story even though a belt was already securely in place.

Nevertheless, in the concluding scenes, Maya's very opacity, Chastain's fierceness, and Bigelow's artful cross-cutting between the Navy SEALs' mission and Maya waiting back at headquarters all combine to give the climax a mythological resonance. The montage makes it look as if Maya is presiding over the deadly hunt even though she is miles away. And when the SEALs present the corpse to her for official identification, the effect is of a sacrificial victim being laid at the feet of a high priestess. This ritualistic quality is far removed from movies like *Rambo*, which try to get us to experience vengeance as savage delight. Bigelow and Boal aim more at a feeling of *es muss sein*: "it must be." Their film suggests that the raid on Abbottabad was already written the day the two towers of the World Trade Center melted and thousands died. After the raid, Maya sits in a military air transport, its only passenger. "Where do you want to go?" the pilot asks. She bursts into tears. She has fulfilled her function and is now reverting to whatever kind of human being she was before her assignment. The furies are satisfied. Are we? ■

Anthony Domestico

Our Hazlitt?

James Wood

The Fun Stuff
And Other Essays
James Wood
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $27, 336 pp.

James Wood, a staff writer for the *New Yorker* and the author of the new essay collection *The Fun Stuff*, is as close to a rock star as a literary critic can get. He is a full professor of English at Harvard based solely on the strength of his literary journalism (he doesn't have a PhD). His reviews are required reading for anyone interested in contemporary fiction, seeming to provoke equal parts adulation—Cynthia Ozick has called him "our Hazlitt"—and recrimination: there's even a blog, "Contra James Wood," devoted to showing that the emperor has no clothes.

Wood comes from an Evangelical background, and defenders and critics alike have cast him as a kind of Old Testament prophet, railing against the "hysterical realism" of writers like Zadie Smith and bemoaning the fact that, in so much contemporary fiction, shallow irony and sociological detail have replaced moral seriousness and aesthetic power. Wood's essays are nothing if not polemical, and he often seems more interested in offering his own normative claims for what constitutes good art (his last book was grandly titled *How Fiction Works*) than in reviewing the book at hand.

I studied with Wood as an undergraduate and still marvel at the gap between Wood's professional reputation and his personal demeanor. In the classroom, Wood was quirky and warm. While puzzling over a complex passage, he would vigorously rub the top of his head, as if hoping to coax interpretive brilliance from his bald spot like a genie from a lamp. Whenever he had students read aloud from his personal touchstones—Saul Bellow and Chekhov, George Eliot and Herman Melville—he would smile and nod, almost purring in satisfaction at the particularly good bits. He seemed not a prophet standing against the tide yelling No, but just a really, really smart reader who really, really cared about literature.

His new collection offers a glimpse of the Wood his students know. The book's very title indicates that this will be a departure from Wood's regular mode: we've left behind the high seriousness of *How Fiction Works* and arrived at the fun stuff. And the opening essay confirms this departure, taking as its subject not the power of nineteenth-century realism or the problems of contemporary fiction but Keith Moon, the manic drummer of the Who. The essay is really a paean to the exhilarating freedom of rock music: as Wood puts it, "subtlety is not rebellion, and subtlety is not freedom, and sometimes it is rebellious freedom that one wants, and only rock music can deliver it." The essay begins with the story of how, as a boy, Wood longed to throw aside his classical music training for the "noise, speed, rebellion" of the drums. Wood then shifts between rapturous descriptions of Moon's inventiveness, disturbing details about the drummer's excesses (when he died, "thirty-two pills were found in his stomach, and the equivalent of a pint of beer in his blood"), and Wood's memories of his own drumming experiences: "only playing the drums still makes me feel like a little boy." This is a side of Wood—seriously playful, but still playful—that readers have rarely seen before, and it's refreshing. Wood, a rock fanboy. Who knew?

The Fun Stuff isn't all quite so much fun—there are serious meditations on the ethical dilemmas of fictionalizing historical trauma, on theodicy, on "the theological question[s] stirred by apocalypse"—but it's more pure fun than any of Wood's previous collections. It's also more personal. A review of Marilynne Robinson's fiction, for instance, opens like this: "Growing up in a religious household, I got used to the sight of priests, but always found them fascinating and slightly repellant." Another, on George Orwell, begins, "I vividly remember when I first read George Orwell." Another, on Patrick French's biography of V. S. Naipaul, begins, "The public snob, the grand bastard, was much in evidence when I interviewed V. S. Naipaul in 1994, and this was exactly as expected."

Wood has been criticized for arguing from his own idiosyncratic tastes to critical principles: *War and Peace*, with its serious moral vision and its sense for the "intimate palpability" of the real, hits all the Wood sweet spots, so it must be the pinnacle of literary achievement and any departure from

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

its example must be lamented. In *The Fun Stuff*, Wood seems more willing to write from personal experience and to acknowledge that he's doing so. The result isn't a weakened critical position but a stronger sense of how and why literature matters to a specific person with specific experiences.

The collection's final essay, "Packing My Father-in-Law's Library," is also its darkest. In it, Wood describes his relationship with his father-in-law—"a complicated, difficult, brilliant man" who was mean when drinking and not particularly nice when sober. When he died, Wood and his wife, the novelist Claire Messud, were left to deal with his extensive book collection. This leads Wood to think about the "paradoxical" nature of personal libraries, which seem to reveal so much and so little about the collector:

> The more time I spent with my father-in-law's books, the more profoundly they seemed not to be revealing but hiding him, like some word-wreathed, untranslatable mausoleum. His Algerian childhood, his interesting mind, the diversion of that mind into run-of-the-mill business, his isolation and estrangement in America.... [O]f course, in some general way, these thousands of volumes—neatly systematic, proudly comprehensive—incarnated the shape of his life, but not the angles of his facets. The books somehow made him smaller, not larger, as if they were whispering: "What a little thing a single human life is, with all its busy, ephemeral, pointless projects."

I don't mean to give the sense that *The Fun Stuff* is a memoir masquerading as a book of criticism, or that it is a completely new direction in Wood's career. The book still stands on its brilliant close readings. In one essay, Wood points to the "vatic histrionic groping" of some of Cormac McCarthy's sentences; in another, to the "slightly barbaric twisting of language" in Norman Rush's *Mating*.

Most memorable is Wood's quiet but ruthless evisceration of the British novelist Alan Hollinghurst. In his review of Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child*, Wood writes that he "lost count of how many times people look 'levelly' or 'narrowly'" at each other within the novel, and follows this with a list of seven such offenses. Then, he writes that "there is a great deal of repetitive muddling," and includes six examples of Hollinghurst describing "muddled feelings" or a "muddled glare" or something similar. He ends his lambasting-by-listing with this sentence: "These relics—flecks of aspic—are, in themselves, hardly heinous, but cumulatively they suggest an overindulgent hospitality toward the material, a comfort level that the prose persistently locates and secures." Game, set, match.

When rereading this passage, though, I was nagged by the striking phrase, "overindulgent hospitality." Wood loves this kind of formulation, wherein a noun is paired with a wholly unexpected modifier. He praises them in other writers—when Hollinghurst is on his game, Wood argues, his "power comes from nouns and adjectives placed

in unusual combination"—and his own work is littered with them. In the same essay, Wood describes the "stealthy equality" of Hollinghurst's sentences when they work well and the "diligent slumber" of them when they don't; in an essay on Marilynne Robinson, we hear of her writing's "founded ecstasies" and its ability to reduce the critic to "fond mumbling"; the list could go on.

To parrot Wood, these phrases, in themselves, are hardly heinous—in fact, they're often quite powerful—but cumulatively they suggest a writer who is too comfortable with his own prose style. Wood tells us that, while reading *The Stranger's Child*, he got an "itching to write a parody of Hollinghurst's Jamesianism." While reading *The Fun Stuff*, I got the itch to write a Wood parody: *But the stolid truancy of his prose never fails. The book's restrained prolixity....*

Perhaps this is why I liked the first and last essays of the collection so much: they show Wood stretching himself, moving beyond his own comfort level. In fact, I wanted more of this. Wood has written on the "bizarre locutions" of Sarah Palin and the theological underpinnings of Rick Santorum's political ideology for the *New Yorker*. I would love to see a collection in which Wood trains his critical eye less on novels and more on political discourse, cinema, religion, music.

In the collection's first essay, Wood describes the half-bar pause that resides between the lines of a song. This pause allows the drummer "space for a quick roll, or a roll and a triplet, or something fancy with snare and hi-hat—really, any variety of filler." This filler, Wood writes, the space where improvisation and invention happens, is "the fun stuff." The best parts of *The Fun Stuff* are likewise those moments when Wood departs from expectation, when he's doing what we least expect of him. Like a good rock band, Wood leaves us wanting more. Now, we wait for the encore. ■

Anthony Domestico *is a PhD candidate in English at Yale University.*

J. Peter Nixon

Wedged Apart

What's the Matter with White People?

Joan Walsh
Wiley, $25.95, 288 pp.

In 2008, Barack Obama won the largest share of the electorate of any Democratic presidential candidate since Lyndon Johnson in 1964. Democrats added seats in the House and knocked off five Republican incumbents in the Senate on their way to achieving a fifty-seven-seat majority. Two years later, the Democrats endured a crushing defeat at the hands of a "Tea Party" insurgency, losing the House majority they had held since 2006 and dropping to a razor-thin fifty-one-seat majority in the Senate.

What happened? Part of the answer was a collapse in support for the Democrats among white voters, who supported Republican House candidates by more than twenty points. Much of this decline was driven by disaffection among working-class whites. Among white voters without college degrees, more than two-thirds who voted in 2010 disapproved of President Obama's performance.

To a casual observer, the weakness of the Democrats among the latter group might seem curious. Haven't the Democrats always been the tribunes of the working class in American politics? African-American, Asian, and Hispanic working-class voters vote overwhelmingly for Democrats. What's the matter with white people?

Answering that question is the objective of *Salon* editor Joan Walsh's new book, *What's the Matter with White People?* Walsh grew up in a working-class Irish Catholic neighborhood in New York City during the 1960s and '70s and was able to observe firsthand her extended family's gradual estrangement from the Democratic Party.

Walsh's method is to weave her personal story together with a broader overview of the political and social history of the past fifty years. She is well aware that there was never a golden age of racial harmony within the Democratic Party, and reviews some of the long-standing tensions between Irish Americans and African Americans going back to the time of slavery. The much idealized New Deal political coalition was only able to emerge because it did not seriously challenge entrenched racism in the South or elsewhere in the United States.

That challenge would come, and with it came pressures that would eventually shatter the Democratic coalition. Walsh details, for example, how rising crime in New York City during the 1960s drove a wedge between a largely Irish-American police force and African Americans critical of its policing tactics and lack of diversity. Similar conflicts emerged between African Americans and Jews over "community control" in the Brooklyn public schools, which led to a bitter strike by the largely Jewish teaching staff in 1968. (A joke in Woody Allen's postapocalyptic farce *Sleeper* blames the movie's cataclysm on the use of an atom bomb by teacher-union president Albert Shanker.)

Walsh is sensitive to the ways in which the political clumsiness of liberals during this era produced alienation and resentment among the white working class. At the same time, she blames the Republicans—and the Nixon administration in particular—for inflaming racial tensions through their use of a "Southern Strategy" that courted the segregationist supporters of presidential candidate George Wallace. More poignantly, she tells the story of her mother, a JFK Democrat who gradually moved toward the Republicans and ultimately voted for Nixon in 1972. Later, of course, would come the wholesale de-

Richard Nixon departing for the Republican National Convention in 1972

fection of both Southern and Northern working-class whites from the Democratic Party that led to Ronald Reagan's victories in 1980 and '84.

Like most activist liberals, Walsh spent the 1980s in the political wilderness, working on local elections in Chicago and doing community organizing in Oakland. These experiences led her to question the way many Democrats seemed inclined to writeoff the white working class. Both Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, she notes, were able to win the presidency because they emphasized an economic agenda that united people across racial and ethnic lines.

Walsh's argument is sound. But the story she tells has been told—and often told better—by others. The difficult racial politics in New York in the '60s and '70s have been amply chronicled in works such as Jim Sleeper's *The Closest of Strangers* and Jonathan Rieder's *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism*. Boston's even more challenging racial history was well documented in J. Anthony Lukas's Pulitzer Prize–winning *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families*.

What all these works have in common is strong reporting that gets inside the heads of individuals and families at the center of the story. Walsh clearly hopes the story of her extended family will play the same role in this book. Unfortunately, there just isn't enough detail. Even when their names are mentioned (and several remain anonymous), they tend to blur into one another. We don't get a sense of why they, personally, have made the political transition that Walsh is trying to describe. Ultimately, the book reveals a lot more about Walsh than about the people who are ostensibly the focus of her narrative. Good reporting should do the opposite.

More fundamentally, it's not clear that the urban working-class (and largely Catholic) whites at the heart of Walsh's book are still the Democrats' core problem. Despite Obama's weakness with this demographic, he still ran well in 2012 in the heavily white states of the Midwest, including Ohio, which has historically trended Republican. Obama has even won Michigan's Macomb County—the epicenter of white working-class racial resentment chronicled by pollster Stanley Greenberg in the 1980s—in two consecutive elections.

These days, the Democrats' real problem with white voters is in the South. In 2012, Obama won about 46 percent of the white vote outside the South—a figure comparable to other Democratic presidential candidates—but only 27 percent within the South. One of the most striking graphics from the 2008 election showed a map of the United States with the counties where Obama did better than John Kerry in blue and the counties where he did worse in red. Virtually the whole country is blue except for a strip of counties running through Appalachia, the deep South, and East Texas.

Walsh's recommendation that the Democrats pursue a more populist economic agenda may not succeed in bringing these voters back into their coalition. The cultural and ideological cleavages are deep and, if anything, getting deeper as the Democrats increasingly take their cultural cues from well-educated voters on America's coasts. In the wake of their decisive defeat in the 2012 election, it was suggested that the Republicans had "run out" of white voters. This may prove to be true of the Democrats as well. ■

J. Peter Nixon *blogs at dotCommonweal.*

Julia G. Young

Hidden in Plain Sight

Latino Catholicism
Transformation in America's Largest Church
Timothy Matovina
Princeton University Press, $29.95, 328 pp.

"We didn't cross the border; the border crossed us!" This wry Mexican-American refrain serves as a reminder that the Hispanic presence in what is now the United States goes back a very long way. After all, the entire Southwest belonged to Mexico until 1848. And of course, the Spanish were the first Europeans to settle North America, establishing settlements—and Catholic missions—in locations as widespread as St. Augustine, Florida (1565); San Antonio, Texas (1718); and San Francisco, California (1776).

This Latino presence, however, was largely left out of narratives of U.S. history. After the U.S. conquest of Mexico's former territory (including large parts of Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Arizona, Nevada, and California), Spanish-speaking people in the region often lost their land, rights, and status; their contributions to the development of the area were downplayed or dismissed; and Eastern politicians and the literate public invoked the notion of Manifest Destiny to encourage colonization and settlement of the West by white settlers.

The exclusion of the Latino story has also affected common historical understandings of the Catholic Church in the United States. As Timothy Matovina points out in his comprehensive and timely *Latino Catholicism: Transformation in America's Largest Church,* many depictions of U.S. Catholic history "obscure [Latino] contributions." Instead, "popular perceptions have frequently relegated the historical significance of Hispanic Catholicism…to a romanticized and bygone day of the Spanish missions."

According to this line of thought, Catholicism established itself in North America during the British Colonial period and accelerated fundamentally with the great waves of mass Catholic immigration (primarily from Ireland, Germany, and Italy) during the mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. It would reach a culmination of sorts in the mid-twentieth century, with the Americanization of those immigrants, a process that was solidified by the election of John F. Kennedy, the first Catholic president.

This narrative not only leaves out the long history of the Catholic Church in the Southwest; it also fails to account for the ongoing Americanization of new waves of Latino immigrants. Matovina provides a much-needed counterpoint by highlighting the vitality and persistence of the Spanish-speaking Catholic communities, even after the 1848 Mexican-American War. No mere loose collection of aging missions, the Latino Church by the nineteenth century was far more organized and extensive than many scholars have assumed, with "extant faith communities, religious traditions, and clergy in various locales." Mexican-Americans energetically asserted their Catholic heritage through public celebrations (such as feasts and devotions) and other local traditions.

Yet Matovina goes beyond simply incorporating this forgotten history. Over eight chapters, he tells the story of Latino Catholicism during the twentieth century, emphasizing its connections with the Spanish colonial past while discussing the great variety of religious traditions, expectations, and needs among the diverse Latino population.

During the first half of the twentieth century, Latino migrants to the United States came predominantly from Mexico, and to a lesser extent, from Puerto Rico and Cuba. Since the 1990s, however, millions of Latinos have come from every country in Latin America and the Caribbean. They have also migrated to areas where there was no previous Hispanic population, such as Atlanta. As a result, today's U.S. Catholic Church now contains dioceses where "a significant Hispanic presence has arisen for the first time." As Matovina demonstrates, the response of the church to these continuously arriving

Old Mission Church, Santa Barbara, 1876

CARLETON E. WATKINS (1829–1916)

waves of Latino immigrants has been by turns both positive and problematic.

First, the positive: Today's Latino Catholics are the beneficiaries of more than half a century of Hispanic activism and advocacy within the church. Matovina traces the admirable efforts of Latino leaders—both clerical and lay—to organize and minister to the Spanish-speaking population since the 1950s. Notable efforts include the formation of PADRES and Las Hermanas, the first associations of Latino clergy and religious. The Encuentros, three workshop-oriented meetings of Latino Catholic leaders that occurred in the 1970s and '80s, generated unprecedented community formation, emphasizing issues such as community leadership, social justice, evangelization, and youth ministry. Apostolic movements, such as the Cursillo de Cristiandad, the formation of Christian base communities, and the Catholic charismatic renewal, revitalized Latino involvement. Increasingly, parishes are promoting Latino cultural expressions and faith traditions, such as the feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe and Way of the Cross rituals. And bishops have become outspoken proponents of immigration reform, a fact that has not gone unnoticed by Latinos. All these developments are "altering the landscape of U.S. Catholicism."

Yet Matovina also outlines a number of challenging structural and demographic issues. First of all, despite the growing number of Latino Catholics in the United States, they are the most underrepresented ethnic group in the priesthood and among female religious. They also make up less than 10 percent of active bishops. This poses a problem of representation at both the upper and lower levels of the institutional Catholic world: Latinos lack a significant presence in the hierarchy, as well as sufficient priests and nuns in their home parishes. Other recent problems, such as the "demotion" of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Hispanic Affairs to a subcommittee; the sense of distance between Spanish-speaking and non-Spanish-speaking members of parishes; disapproval by some clergy of Latino cultural practices and new apostolic movements; and the sexual-abuse crisis have fueled what Matovina describes as Latinos' ongoing "sense of rejection" in church.

Since Latinos today make up some 35 percent of the U.S. Catholic population and will be the single greatest source of demographic growth over the next several decades, church leaders should continue to respond to the needs of the Latino community, and to incorporate its devotional practices in a way that keeps the next generation of Latinos involved in the church. The best histories are written not just to inform, but also to guide. Thanks to Matovina's rich and engaging study, Catholic leaders have a clear path to follow. ■

Julia G. Young *is an assistant professor of history at the Catholic University of America.*

LETTERS continued from page 4

cause the manufacturer (Genentech) does not want it approved. Genetech took the formula for Avastin, changed the molecule, did the required studies on the changed molecule, and called the new drug Ranibizumad (Lucentis). That was approved by the FDA, and now Medicare now pays $2000 for each dose of the drug. Independent studies have shown that both drugs are equally effective. Medicare should allow Ranibizumad (Lucentis) to be used only if the prescribing doctor fills out paperwork to justify its use.

5. Medicare pressures doctors to switch to electronic medical records. The software for an electronic medical-records system is very expensive. It costs about twenty-five thousand dollars per doctor to switch to electronic records. And it's not easy to tell a good system from a bad one. When it was proposed that the software should be open source—that is, free—lobbyists intervened. Senator Jay Rockefeller (D-W.V.) tried to introduce a bill to make the software open source, but it never saw the light of day. If the system was open source there would probably be just one system, and all doctors and hospitals could be on the same page. As it is, each doctor and hospital has its own system, and the systems are not integrated into one another. All this makes electronic medical-record systems expensive and unwieldy—certainly not in patients' best interests.

These are but five problems that inflate the cost of medicine in the United States. There are many more. But these issues show why we are spending more on health care than we should be. Solutions are available, but, in the end, politics rules the day.

ART FLEMING, MD
Pittsburgh, Pa.

THE AUTHOR REPLIES

I have no argument with any of Art Fleming's points. Ideally, we should have an independent board oversee Medicare (and Obamacare) pricing rules in order to whittle away at all the little backroom deals. But on my general point that medical-care productivity has been advancing quite rapidly, the writer, as an ophthalmologist, can well attest to that fact. Modern cataract repair would have looked miraculous not that long ago; choosing whether to do one or both at the same time would have been almost inconceivable. CHARLES R. MORRIS

A JONES FOR JONES

Many thanks to Anthony Domestico for his article "Words in Action" (January 11, 2013) on the poetry of David Jones. As Domestico argues, while Jones's verse presents considerable difficulties to readers, the allusive and innovative nature of his style is essential to the poetry's riches. Jones is not widely taught or read. There are, however, good aids to appreciation, chief of which is by the Canadian scholar Thomas Dilworth, whose reading of David Jones is clear and comprehensive. There is also a very active David Jones Society in Wales, and an American society (davidjonesartistand poet.blogspot.com). *Flashpoint* magazine recently published an issue on Jones (flash pointmag.com/index13.htm), featuring many of the contributors to the David Jones conference that was held in Washington last spring. There is a ready audience, though their numbers may be few.

EDWARD T. WHEELER
Quaker Hill, Conn.

LIKE A FOX

Your editorial "Lose, Lose"(January 11, 2013) was extremely rich in detailing the pitfalls involved in raising the age for Medicare coverage, details that are unknown or misunderstood by too many Americans. What could be easily understood is the idea (not new) of means-testing Medicare premiums. I am semi-retired on Medicare with a premium of about $114 a month, and make less than $35,000 a year. I would gladly suffer a 3-percent increase to my Medicare premium every month; it would cost me $41.04 over the course of a year. If I were to make $35,000 to $40,000, I would gladly suffer a 4-percent increase to my premium, and if I made $40,000 to $45,000, a 5-percent increase—for every $5,000 in annual income, a 1-percent increase in premium cost. Am I crazy, or do you think most Medicare recipients would support such a measure? JAY DERRINGER
Phoenix, Ariz.

Behind Enemy Lines

Sandra Dutton

"Stay away from Catholic boys," my father told me. I was about thirteen, sitting in the kitchen while he was making pancakes. We were Presbyterian, but the words struck me as some sort of family code. He said it was not too early to think about these things, and that I would be unhappy if I married a Catholic. "More than likely, you'll have to convert," he said, "or at least sign over your children, and they'll come home from Catholic school spouting all that gibberish." I knew he was referring to the prayers my Catholic friends recited, the Hail Marys and the Our Fathers.

But I found Catholic boys attractive. I remember seeing them dashing for the bus in their dark slacks and white shirts, different from the boys I went to school with, in Levis and khakis. As a thirteen-year-old, watching high-school kids on a local TV dance show, I was enamored of the boys from Purcell or Roger Bacon. I liked the way they wore their sweaters backwards under their jackets so the ribbing cut high across their shirt collars, giving them, oddly enough, a clerical look.

My mother, who grew up Southern Baptist, was also distrustful of Catholics. "Why, they put Mary right up there with Jesus," she said, "and that's *wrong*." So was naming new saints. Just who did they think they were, creating new saints? No one but the original apostles should be called a saint. And showing Jesus hanging on the cross: didn't the Catholics know he'd risen? And praying for the dead: didn't they know if the dead hadn't been good Christians, they were going where they were going. Forget about lighting candles.

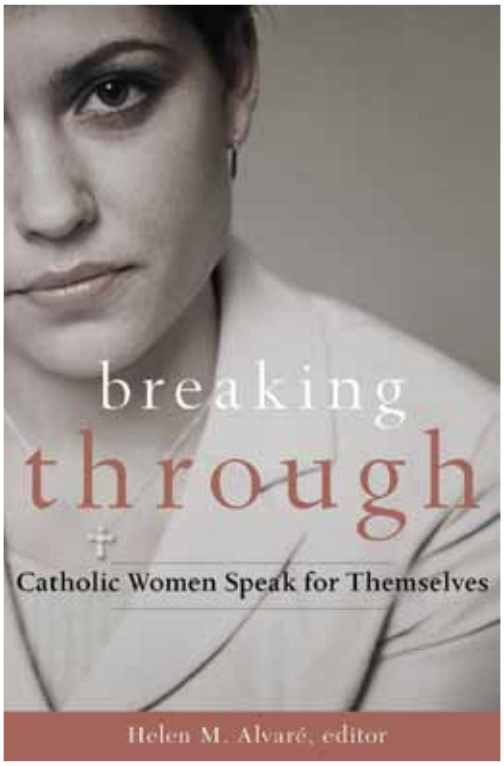
Despite my parents' warnings, I had a Catholic boyfriend during college (after all, I was old enough to decide for myself), but I married a Presbyterian. He'd grown up in Berkeley, and he told me that as an eight-year-old he had stood at the front of the sanctuary with his Sunday school class, missed a cue, and remained standing when he should have sat down. He felt ashamed and embarrassed, he said, and never wanted to go back. Sometimes, in jest, he would burst into the first lines of an old Sunday school song: "Oh it's the B-I-B-L-E / That's the book for me." We seldom took our kids to church. My mother gave them Bibles for Christmas and took them to services when we visited. I bought a Revised Standard Version to read alongside the King James Version, because I thought it was interesting, but I began to consider people who believed Jesus was the son of God unenlightened.

My husband passed away after twenty-nine years of marriage, and I married, two years later, one of our friends, a devout Catholic. One of our first dates was a Catholic Christmas Eve Mass. I was stunned at the similarity between the Protestant and Catholic services—both the liturgy and the order of worship. (What had all my parents' fuss been about? Then again, that was in the days before Vatican II.) I was soon to learn that the Catholics often sang the same hymns. When I hear them now, my eyes sting as I remember the comforting feel of being a child surrounded by adults singing sacred music. I regret that my children so seldom had this experience. I like the homilies the priests deliver, usually from memory. I like the emphasis on Communion. I like the openness of the church library. I like the incense and candles and mystery. I like the potluck dinners, where someone always brings a jug of wine. I find myself interested in the saints, in Thomas Merton, in holy water.

What I find in the Catholic Church is a sense of beauty and order. An unpretentiousness. Our church in Boothbay Harbor was on what was once the poor side of town, where all the canneries were. Inside it's like a ship turned upside down, with its criss-cross of timbers. The canneries are gone. Now it sits like a white beacon on the hill overlooking the harbor.

My son went through a difficult divorce last year. Before one of the hearings, my husband came upon a prayer to Mary. I don't usually use intercessory prayer, he said, but we tried it, and it worked—and worked, and worked. I've become attuned to the statues of Mary, to the simple shrines I've seen people make. Since I found this experience so transforming, I decided to enroll in RCIA. I cannot say I agree with everything the church teaches, but I know through experience that minor differences aren't a dealbreaker. I know when it's time to join the enemy. ■

Sandra Dutton's *most recent book is* Mary Mae and the Gospel Truth. *She lives in the foothills of the Catskills, where she writes, paints, and illustrates.*



Pop culture increasingly treats the "Catholic female" as an oxymoron

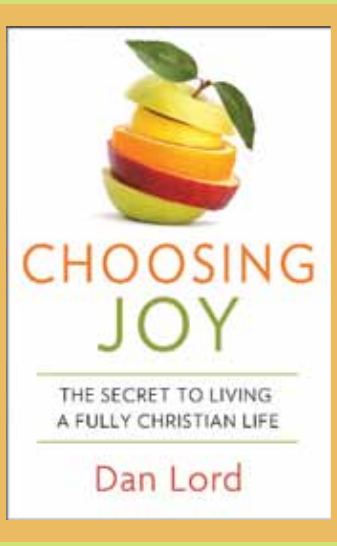
Fresh Inspiration for Catholic Women

Breaking Through: Catholic Women Speak for Themselves

Too many people draw conclusions about women and the Catholic faith without examining Catholic sources. Discover stories of those who successfully broke through and embraced freedom on the other side — real Catholic women who asked the questions, explored their faith and secular sources, and grasped the joys of being Catholic.

ID# T1371 $16.95

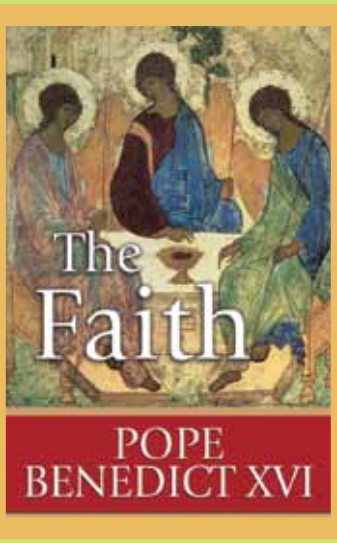
KINDLE & NOOK VERSIONS AVAILABLE!



Discover New Joy

Overcome your obstacles and focus your heart, mind, and strength on God so that you can receive the happiness and peace that the world cannot give.

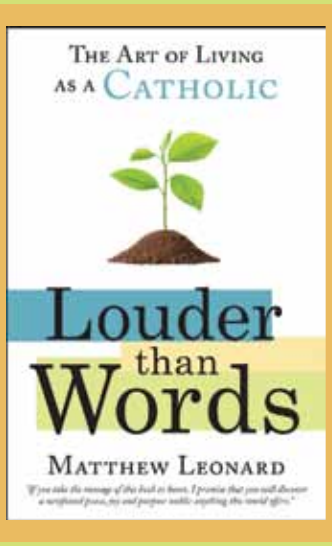
ID# T1271 $13.95



Get Closer to Christ

Delve into the faith, and learn how to share the Good News with everyone in your life. Pope Benedict helps you know true peace and happiness and become a joy-filled witnesses for God.

ID# T1324 $14.95



Catholic Living

Combining stories of the saints' triumphs with humor and personal anecdotes, this book offers a fresh take on being Catholic in a contemporary world.

ID# T1324 $14.95

A32BBC63

OSV DEALS

Scan code for great Catholic books up to 75% off!

To Order, Call: 1-800-348-2440

Our Sunday Visitor
Centennial Celebration 1912-2012
www.osv.com