*Religion, Politics, Culture*

# Commonweal

JANUARY 2020

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*Religion, Politics, Culture*

# Commonweal

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## LETTERS

# *Scandinavian social programs, defending indigenous land & Barr's micro-morality*

### TRILLION, WITH A 'T'

Max Foley-Keene ("Equality Isn't Cheap," November) makes fundamental sense of a key to the success of government-funded social-insurance institutions in the Scandinavian countries: that the quality must be so good that the middle class doesn't turn to expensive market providers of better services, thereby maintaining middle-class support for the programs. He estimates that to match Swedish levels of quality, the United States would have to spend some $15 trillion over ten years.

That sounds like a lot, and it is. But a brief look at international tax comparisons researched by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (an economic think tank whose members are the thirty-six richest nations) puts this in perspective. Considering all taxes—federal, state, and local—the United States ranks far below average. If our taxes were raised not to the level of Sweden but simply to the average for the OECD nations, we'd have another $1.6 trillion (that's a "t") to spend each year.

*Daniel K. Finn*
*Clemens Professor of Economics and Professor of Theology*
*St. John's University &*
*The College of St. Benedict*
*St. Joseph, Minn.*

### STANDING UP FOR JUSTICE

As Austen Ivereigh described in his article ("Exposing the Spirits," December) the Amazon synod's closing document establishes the direction of the church "to become Samaritan, merciful, missionary, 'inserted and inculturated'…standing with the people in defense of their rights and their land." A commitment to upholding rights becomes especially relevant as we witness peoples in Ecuador and Chile, among others, stand up for justice and suffer violent backlash from government authorities.

In Ecuador, where I lived from January through July, indigenous communities began protests on October 3 in reaction to an IMF austerity package proposed by President Moreno. Popular manifestations followed for eleven days, led largely by the CONAIE, the popular coalition of the twelve indigenous nations in Ecuador. Under the direction of current President Jaime Vargas, the CONAIE shows unique expression through integrating pluralistic identities. CONAIE draws from Amazonian, Andean, Catholic, and Evangelical wisdom to promote the rights of the Ecuadorian indigenous people and their lands. Formed in 1986, the popular organization has a particular understanding of both human rights and nationalism that promotes communal indigenous agency, rejects neoliberal actors such as the IMF, and cares deeply for the rights of nature, *Pachamama*. While in other global contexts an exclusive ethno-nationalism has taken hold, CONAIE—an organization based in grassroots resistance—puts forth a framework that remarkably resembles Catholic Social Thought and liberation theologies. Their official objectives not only reject colonial and neocolonial actions but promote participatory democracy, solidarity, and equity for *indígena*, *afro-*, and *mestizo* alike. The organization supports the decentralization of power and communitarianism while fighting to protect lands and natural resources.

95 YEARS

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# LETTERS

When staying with an Andean indigenous community on the outskirts of La Esperanza, Imbabura, I witnessed a community that lives by such values. Politically active in the Pachakutik indigenous party and local culture, families tend to their land, work to send their children to university, and share with visitors a messy historical memory of oppression under colonization and politico-spiritual liberation via popular organizing and communal life. When I spoke with a community leader about their involvement with the church, especially with regard to the prominent Ecuadorian liberation pastor Bishop Leonidas Proaño, she expressed her doubts despite some of her community being Catholic: "[Proaño] spoke of us as 'the poor'—we have never been poor." Her words call into question the limits of a preferential option for the poor and the moral kitsch that can so often drive such work, yet I still believe our brothers and sisters deserve our voices of solidarity and friendship.

While the most recent protests ended on October 14, *la lucha* turns a new page. The CONAIE and allies demand the resignation of President Moreno, a number of economic reforms, and justice for those killed, severely injured, and held in prison as "terrorists" by the government. On November 1, insistent advocacy led to the release of six adolescents—the youngest, fourteen years old—who had been detained and charged with terrorism during the protests. Friends, family, and CONAIE members received the adolescents upon their release from the detention center in Rumiñahui with a ceremonial cleansing and communal event, rejecting the definition of terrorism concocted by the government. And October 31 marked the delivery of the official proposal with several demands, developed by CONAIE and their committee of social organizations. Representatives from the United Nations and the Catholic Church stood as mediators.

I continue to stay in communication with many of my coworkers, hosts, and friends in Ecuador, who range from the city-dwelling upper-class to rural indigenous folks. I write in solidarity with those who have graciously welcomed me *en su hermoso país, Ecuador.*

*John DiBello*
*Chestnut Hill, Mass.*

## GOOD NEWS FOR THE POOR

I would like to thank Paul Baumann for his article "William Barr, Catholic Moralist" (December). I seldom find a critique like that in the mainstream media anymore, which used to acknowledge the schools, churches, and religion of the prominent and not-so-prominent. Now, religion doesn't seem to count. Economics, politics, and celebrity define us all. Religion and its consequences go largely unexplored.

I suppose we'd take no notice at all of Barr's religious beliefs if he didn't offer them in his Notre Dame speech, and they do influence him, as Baumann points out. Barr believes in a "micro-morality" that motivates individuals to do good. He suspects the social programs governments produce. He's not alone.

It would be interesting to spend some time at Barr's parish to see what gospel is preached there. Fifty years after Vatican II, it's a good time to see how the council has been received in parishes, dioceses, and countries. Has that great church blueprint—which Pope Francis follows—made it to the pews and preachers? Looks like it hasn't reached Barr.

Baumann mentions his experience at Mass the day he read the Barr speech. The Book of Sirach, the Gospel of Luke, the responsorial psalm all called Barr's beliefs into question. "The Lord hears the cry of the poor."

I wonder if some aren't disturbed by today's liturgy because of this message from Scripture. Do some conservative groups favor a Latin Mass because it blunts the plain meaning of Scripture proclaimed so generously in our vernacular lectionary today? Hard to deny their advocacy for the poor and their call to governments and ordinary people alike to do something.

*Fr. Victor Hoagland, CP*
*Jamaica, N. Y.*

# Not a Sham

Three years after his January 2017 inauguration, Donald Trump faces trial in the U.S. Senate on two articles of impeachment approved in December by the House of Representatives. It is all but certain that the Republican-majority Senate will not vote to remove him from office. The rest of the country will get to decide his fate in November.

Still, it was right for Democrats in the House to proceed with impeachment, both how and when they did. The articles of impeachment are narrow in scope but nevertheless damning. The first charges Trump with abusing the power of the presidency. In secretly withholding nearly $400 million in military aid to Ukraine until it announced an investigation of Joseph Biden for nonexistent acts of "corruption," the president "[ignored and injured] national security and other vital national interests to obtain an improper personal political benefit. He has also betrayed the nation by abusing his office to enlist a foreign power in corrupting democratic elections" (the House Judiciary Committee report alleges multiple federal crimes, including criminal bribery and wire fraud, under this charge). The second article charges Trump with obstructing Congress's investigation into these abuses. In defying subpoenas for documents and blocking staff members from testifying about the Ukraine scheme, Trump engaged in "categorical and indiscriminate defiance" that prevented the House from conducting its oversight role and violated the separation of powers. These actions meet the definition of "high crimes" as the Constitution's framers understood the term. Envisioning (or dreading) such behavior by the executive, the framers were clear that it could not be countenanced. They "provided for impeachment of the president because they wanted the president, unlike the king, to be controlled by law," as legal scholar Noah Feldman told the Judiciary Committee in December, "and because they feared that a president might abuse the power of his office to gain personal advantage, corrupt the electoral process, and keep himself in office."

Trump's supporters in Washington and on Fox News often cite the approaching election in inveighing against impeachment, arguing that the voters themselves, through a free and fair election, can get rid of Trump if they don't like him. But there is nothing in the Constitution restricting impeachment to non-election years or to second terms. In any case, the framers made explicit that cases of executive corruption are to be settled by Congress, not at the ballot box. This is partly because such corruption can make elections themselves less "free and fair." Had details of the Ukraine scheme not come to light, Trump might have succeeded in abusing his power to damage the reputation of a possible opponent in the November 2020 election. Even after that scheme was discovered, the president publicly invited China to investigate the Bidens, and continued to recommend that the Ukranian government undertake "a major investigation" into a Democratic presidential candidate. It was precisely the risk that Trump might corrupt the 2020 electoral process that made it necessary to expedite the impeachment inquiry. Next year might be too late.

By now the nation is used to the unwillingness of Republicans to criticize Trump's behavior. Yet as impeachment grew more likely, the Republicans not only defended that behavior but also imitated it—the stonewalling, the lying, the intimidation and belittling of respected government officials, the peddling of debunked conspiracy theories—often in a state of performative high dudgeon. Perhaps that is the only option when there's no disputing the facts at hand. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has since declared the GOP's intent to align itself completely with the White House's impeachment defense strategy: "I'm going to take my cues from the president's lawyers." Sen. Lindsey Graham, trapped in a downward spiral of self-abasement, has bragged of not reading the impeachment report, called the inquiry "a sham" and "total B.S.," and most recently declared that he's "not trying to pretend to be a fair juror." Truthfulness is an increasingly scarce commodity in the GOP, so credit both McConnell and Graham for openly admitting they intend to break the oath of impartiality they will take before the Senate trial begins.

There are of course political risks in impeaching the president. It subjects Democrats to charges that they're seeking to overturn the results of the 2016 election, and it may jeopardize the reelection of some Democrats in Congress. It could even work to Trump's political benefit and propel him to another term. It will do nothing to heal America's political divide. But these are risks the Democrats have to take. They cannot just stand by as a president violates the Constitution in full view. Doing so would invite more such abuses in the future—not only by this president but also by his successors, Republican or Democrat. The impeachment of Donald Trump is no "sham." In fact, it is a duty: a necessary expression of fidelity to the first principles of our Constitution.

*—December 18, 2019*

# The Afghanistan Papers

The *Washington Post*'s "Afghanistan Papers" story was disheartening and in many ways infuriating, but it was not shocking or even surprising. The grim facts are familiar. Eighteen years of war, 2,300 U.S. troops killed and 20,000 wounded. The Afghans, of course, have suffered even more. There has been little prospect of "victory" since the initial defeat of Al Qaeda and its Taliban allies in 2002. That military operation was justified by the attacks of 9/11, but the ongoing occupation of Afghanistan was unnecessary and insupportable, especially after George W. Bush launched the calamitous invasion of Iraq.

More than $1 trillion has been spent, and at present the resurgent Taliban controls or contests most of the country. Efforts to recruit and train army and police forces loyal to the Kabul government and effective in the field have largely failed. It has been clear for more than a decade that the "mission" in Afghanistan, as far as the U.S. military and presidential administrations of both parties were concerned, was not to win but rather to avoid being blamed for losing. Truth, it is often said, is the first casualty of war. But by any measure, eighteen years of futility and lies are an indictment not just of the U.S. military, but of American politicians and a complacent American public as well. Fool us once, shame on you. Fool us eighteen times…

According to the *Post*, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction has been interviewing U.S. military officers and civilian officials about the progress of the war since 2008. In public, the military and both the Bush and Obama administrations claimed the battle against the Taliban, reconstruction of the country, and the viability of Kabul's government were all making headway. In private, they reported a very different story. As early as 2003, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld complained he had no idea who the enemy was in Afghanistan. Douglas Lute, a retired three-star Army general, advised both the Bush and Obama administrations. "We were devoid of a fundamental understanding of Afghanistan—we didn't know what we were doing," he told the special inspector general in 2015. "We didn't have the foggiest notion of what we were undertaking."

Why have presidents, Congress, and the American people allowed this charade to go on for so long? It is hard to avoid the fact that most Americans remain untouched by the costs of the war. Only a small percentage of citizens serve in the military, while the war has been paid for with borrowed money. The government has already paid $500 billion in interest on those loans, according to the *New York Times*. In the meantime, in rare if dubious acts of bipartisanship, Congress continues to borrow massive amounts of money for its Pentagon budget. No one, it seems, pays a political price for voting for endless military spending as long as taxpayers never see the actual bills. Thanks to steep jumps in the Pentagon's budget under President Trump, the nation now spends more than $700 billion each year on the military. The House just passed a defense budget that includes millions for a "Space Force," another of Trump's vanity projects.

It is hard to resist the conclusion that Americans made a pact with the devil when we dispensed with conscription in favor of an all-volunteer military. If young men and women were being drafted to fight in Afghanistan, there is not the slightest possibility the war would have dragged on for eighteen years. Protests in the streets and in the voting booth would have forced the hand of any president who refused to end a futile war because he was afraid of being accused of losing it. No one relishes the idea of their son or daughter being drafted, and it would be just and necessary to allow draftees to seek alternative service if they objected to a particular war on moral grounds. But the history of the past four decades of U.S. military overreach warrants resurrecting some more direct democratic curb on the nation's war-making abilities. It is too easy to support a war you or your children don't have to fight.

*—Paul Baumann*

# Progressive DAs

For decades local district attorneys have tended to be celebrated for "tough-on-crime" policies and aggressive prosecution of even low-level offenses, an approach that landed hundreds of thousands of people (often people of color) in prison. But in some large cities, a new breed of district attorney is taking over. Many of these "progressive DAs" draw inspiration from Larry Krasner, the district attorney of Philadelphia. Krasner was elected in 2017 on a platform of ending mass incarceration by, rather simply, putting fewer people in prison. In a campaign speech to supporters, Krasner vowed to build a criminal-justice system "based on building up society rather than tearing it apart." Since taking office in January 2018, Krasner has shown that he can deliver on this promise. His office has ended bail payments for nonviolent offenders; reduced the supervision of parolees; decriminalized marijuana possession; opened a sentencing review board to evaluate past cases and sentences; pushed for safe-injection sites to lessen the rate of opioid overdose; and diverted low-level drug offenses, some gun violations, and some prostitution cases from criminal prosecution to addiction treatment or other social-service programs. Krasner's office has also given priority to reforming the police force, reportedly compiling a list of officers with a history of abuses like violence, racial profiling, or civil-rights violations. And in July, Krasner filed a motion with the Pennsylvania Supreme Court to

declare the death penalty unconstitutional in the state.

While the details and logistics of each of Krasner's reforms can (and should) be debated and tested, it's not too soon to say that, overall, the evidence is on Krasner's side: policies that keep nonviolent criminals out of prison reduce crime because they are less disruptive both to the individual lives of those convicted and to their communities. Other DAs around the country have implemented similar policies: Boston, Chicago, St. Louis, and Baltimore have gained national attention for the reforms their new DAs have enacted.

There's been backlash, of course—not from the DAs' own constituencies but at the state level. Officials who answer to a more conservative statewide electorate have attempted to curtail the ability of progressive DAs to implement their policies. For example, Pennsylvania lawmakers gave Attorney General Josh Shapiro (the prosecutor behind the so-called "PA Grand Jury Report" documenting clerical sex abuse) authority over certain firearms cases in Philadelphia, but nowhere else in the state. This means that if Krasner declines to prosecute a case, Philadelphia police can still lobby Shapiro to do so.

The approach of Krasner and like-minded DAs is part of a larger national discussion about what kinds of crimes are the "real problem" in American society. Krasner has joked that DAs like him have "woken up the giants"—the NRA, the Fraternal Order of Police, and politicians on both the right and the left with a stake in the prison-industrial complex. He could be right. Attorney General William Barr and President Trump have both taken aim at Krasner. Barr, who as attorney general under George H. W. Bush advocated for "more incarceration," gave a speech in August to a gathering of law-enforcement officers in which he attacked "district attorneys that style themselves as 'social justice reformers'" as "anti-law-enforcement DAs" who are "demoralizing to us in law enforcement and dangerous to public safety." At a campaign rally in Hershey, Pennsylvania, on December 10, Trump attacked Krasner directly, calling him the "worst" DA in the country and claiming that he "lets killers out almost immediately."

Trump knows such law-and-order rhetoric works in his favor politically. Putting away the "bad guys" makes his supporters think he's a good one. But the stakes are too high to fall for this ruse. Krasner and other DAs are at work remaking a criminal-justice system focused on fairness, rehabilitation, and community. They are providing admirable examples of how to resist Trump's politics of fear.

*—Regina Munch*

## Food-Stamp Cuts

Come April, many Americans will have a much harder time finding food, thanks to the major cuts to SNAP announced by the Trump administration last month. A new eligibility rule approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture will strip some 700,000 people of their monthly benefits—typically just $127 per month, or $1.40 per meal—in order to save the federal government a meager $5 billion over five years. For reference, that's the same figure Trump is demanding for his border wall. It's only the first of three planned rollbacks the administration is intent on implementing before the 2020 election. Taken together, these changes are expected to purge 3 million people, including a million children, from the rolls. Even school-lunch benefits tied to SNAP enrollment status are endangered.

In its public comments on SNAP "reform," the Trump administration has callously revived old myths that demonize the poor as lazy, undeserving freeloaders. It claims that the rules—which are said to affect only so-called "able-bodied adults without dependents," but actually end up harming entire poor communities indirectly—are aimed at "restoring the dignity of work to a sizable segment of our population." Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue claimed that "government dependency" was "never intended to be a way of life." Americans are a "generous people," he said, but their kindness has its limits: "We need to encourage people by giving them a helping hand, but not allowing it to become an indefinitely giving hand."

It's an understatement to say, as Democratic presidential candidate Julián Castro recently did, that making cuts to the nation's largest food-assistance program by executive order rather than legislative consensus takes the country "in the wrong direction." In the richest nation on earth, hunger remains a daily scourge. Trump's own Agriculture Department estimates that more than 14 million Americans suffer from food insecurity. Wealthy Americans like Trump and Perdue cynically contend that making people hungrier will somehow transform them into more productive workers. But studies have demonstrated that tying nutritional benefits to more stringent work requirements actually increases poverty, while disproportionately punishing people of color and producing no permanent gains in employment.

As with so many other policies of the Trump administration, human flourishing isn't really the point. Cruelty is—especially when it can be inflicted on the constituencies of political opponents. The grinch-like timing of the announcement didn't pass unnoticed by journalists and anti-poverty advocates, whose condemnation of the administration's meanspiritedness mirrors the 140,000 public comments, overwhelmingly negative, that were submitted to the Agriculture Department before the rule was adopted.

Castro was right to call the new measures "stupid." But they're also vicious. The failure to imagine the real conditions of people without the means to feed themselves, and the refusal to see the poor as fellow citizens worthy of dignity and respect, is a grave moral error, one all too typical of this administration and the rich men who direct it.

*—Griffin Oleynick*

PAUL MOSES

# Money Well Spent

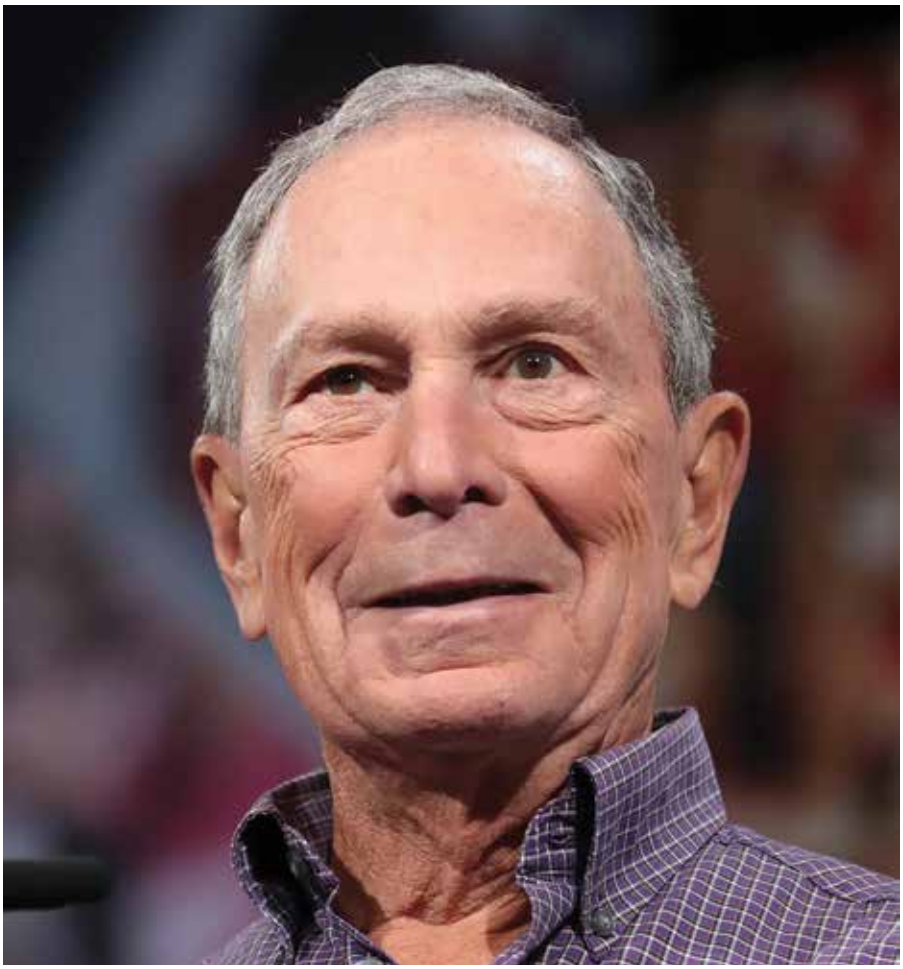
How Michael Bloomberg uses his personal fortune for political leverage

As mayor of the nation's largest city for twelve years, Michael Bloomberg enjoyed bountiful power. New York City's annual budget exceeded that of all but three states, and his position in the country's media capital gave him an enviable pulpit. But his power went much further.

The multi-billionaire spent hundreds of millions of dollars from his immense personal fortune to leverage his influence as mayor. As Bloomberg now pursues the Democratic nomination for president, he faces criticism for making political donations to Republican candidates who supported his favored causes, such as gun control, and for spending so much on his three successful mayoral campaigns.

But the more serious problem with Bloomberg's use of money in politics is the way he merged his wealth with his political agenda while in office. Bloomberg is again trying to make a virtue of his fortune, asserting that he "has always been independent from special interests—he has never accepted campaign contributions—and has worked to eliminate the corrosive power of money in politics."

But there are two sides to the coin of campaign contributions. While Bloomberg doesn't take, he gives—plenty, and in a way that corrodes democracy. The amounts he spent to win friends and influence people as mayor of New York are staggering. For starters, he spent more than $260 million (or $361 million adjusted for inflation) on his three mayoral campaigns. In his last race ($108 million), he outspent his Democratic opponent 18 to 1, and won by just 4.4 percentage points. In doing so he made a joke out of New York City's model campaign-finance law, which limited participants in public funding to $6 million in spending. As he left office



GAGE SKIDMORE

Michael Bloomberg speaks at an event in Des Moines, Iowa, August 10.

at the end of 2013, the *New York Times* calculated Bloomberg made $23 million in donations to other candidates during his twelve years in office. He donated another $263 million to New York's influential nonprofit sector.

Bloomberg's hefty donations were life support for the gerrymander-protected Republican majority in the New York State Senate, which was controlled by rural and suburban legislators who found it distasteful to fund New York City's schools, mass transit, or social services. Seven weeks before Election Day in 2012, Bloomberg wired $1 million to the State Senate Republicans' campaign committee. It was more than six times the size of the committee's next largest donation. On the same day, Bloomberg donated $75,000 more to the "independent Democrats" who crossed party lines to caucus with the Senate Republicans. He spent another $250,000 to support the Democrats who controlled the State Assembly, their largest donation by far.

Bloomberg was obviously trying to buy influence with the majorities in both houses of the legislature, an elected official who dished out donations like a defense contractor. His argument that he used his money in his city's interest is objectionable even at face value: such big spending still tends to corrupt the process.

And often enough, Bloomberg's political career was a beneficiary. Bloomberg's donations to the State Senate Republicans helped his tenuous standing in the Republican Party, but allowed the GOP majority to block legislation that was popular in New York City. This included measures to raise the minimum wage, strengthen rent regulation and gun laws, protect immigrants, and reduce greenhouse-gas emissions. Bloomberg largely stopped giving to New York Republicans after he left office; all those bills passed in 2019 after the Democrats finally took control of the State Senate.

Bloomberg has accomplished a world of good with his philanthropy, but critics say that some of his charity was also an investment in his mayoral power. And indeed, having given $500,000 to one charity, he was able to count on its director to testify in favor of controversial legislation overturning a term-limits law that voters had twice approved in referenda, by ample majorities. That cleared the way for him to seek a third term.

There is much to recommend Bloomberg. He was savvy enough to build a media business that made him the eighth-wealthiest American, according to *Forbes*, with a net worth of $53.4 billion. (President Donald Trump is number 275, with $3.1 billion.) He has used his money to tackle climate change, gun violence, and the opioid epidemic. As mayor, he stewarded New York back from 9/11; rezoned much of the city; built affordable housing and pursued some innovative education and health policies. He took a serious interest in reducing poverty, and he hired top-notch people. His low-key, common-sense approach was a relief after Rudolph Giuliani's more theatrical mayoralty.

But the drawback to his free-spending style of politics is that it deepens the fundamental problem in American democracy: the outsized weight that money has on the levers of power. He gives no sign of understanding that.

MOLLIE WILSON O'REILLY

# A Harmful Doctrine

The Catholic teaching about gay people is not just an error. It's a barrier to compelling political witness.

Look, it's 2020, so I'm just going to say it: the Catholic Church is wrong about gay people.

To put a finer point on it: it is my opinion that the magisterial teaching of the Catholic Church, as it applies to homosexuality and same-sex relationships, is mistaken and ought to be revised.

This has been my opinion for a long time, but I've been quiet about it, for a couple of reasons. First, who cares what I think? And second, why should I make trouble? The answer to the first question is probably still "nobody." My position on this matter is not especially consequential. That's why I can say it. As for the second, I still don't have much of an appetite for trouble. But avoiding the subject for civility's sake has begun to feel cowardly.

I don't think the view that the church is wrong about gay people is a radical opinion. I think a lot of Catholics agree. Some are afraid to say so publicly, because it could make real trouble for them, especially if they are contractually obligated to uphold orthodoxy. What will it cost me, besides a little awkwardness? A few years ago, I was invited by a parish in my hometown to give a talk about Vatican II. I was then uninvited: the bishop told them to find someone else. When I asked for a reason, he expressed vague concern about providing a forum for criticism of the church. It's funny, because I am seldom more positive about the Catholic Church than I am when speaking about Vatican II. But anyway, since I'm already blacklisted in Scranton, what have I got to lose?

So much for keeping quiet. Here are my reasons for speaking up. It has been my experience that same-sex relationships can be occasions of grace and manifestations of deep, self-sacrificing love, just like opposite-sex relationships can. I have seen how the church's claims to the contrary can damage children who are developing a sense of their own identities and worth. I have known the wounded adults those children grow up to be, whose grudges against the church strike me as entirely just. And I have seen LGBTQ people so drawn to Christ's presence in the church that they look past all the dismissals and insults to fight for their place at the Eucharistic table. Their faithfulness


Activists and supporters block the street outside the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., October 8, as it hears arguments in three major employment discrimination cases on whether federal civil-rights law prohibiting workplace discrimination on the "basis of sex" covers gay and transgender employees.

inspires and challenges me. Their witness convinces me the church is wrong to condemn them.

Meanwhile, I have looked to the church for guidance in a time of politics gone haywire. I have waited for the nation's bishops to respond to the malice and hatred and rank dishonesty that characterize President Donald Trump and his supporters in a way that seems commensurate with the threat—not calmly worded statements of dismay over "rhetoric" and "polarization," but direct denunciations of the ugliness that streams directly from the White House and the human misery it engenders. But when I read what the bishops as a body have to say about what is at stake, their formal guidance about what a Catholic citizen's priorities should be, I see language about how Catholics are "called to defend marriage" that clangs like a broken bell. When the U.S. bishops talk about religious liberty, I wait for them to condemn Donald Trump's constant attacks on Muslims, his enthusiastic support for war crimes committed against them, and his campaign pledge to block them as a whole from entering our country. The bishops conference, however, is focused on preserving the right of Catholic institutions to discriminate against LGBTQ people. Flagrant violations of human rights are somehow less urgent than the threat of same-sex couples marrying or raising children. A stubborn persistence in error that used to seem embarrassing but tolerable—*Sigh, the church moves so slowly*—now makes me feel like I'm losing my mind. Our government is turning away refugees, jailing migrants, cutting assistance to the poor, denying the threat of climate change, fueling violent white supremacy, and undermining the legitimacy of government itself. For a Catholic to support a party that carries out those policies is preposterous. For bishops to hold back on criticizing that party because of a perceived need to "defend marriage" is grotesque.

As I see it now, the church's condemnation of homosexuality isn't just an error that needs fixing. It is an obstacle that stops Catholics, leaders and laity alike, from speaking clearly about urgent moral crises and from being perceived as credible when we do.

There are plenty of Catholics who believe the church is right about homosexuality, and they aren't afraid to say so. Which is good! Let's all talk about it, instead of keeping quiet and hoping the subject won't come up. It is reasonable to worry about what such a public debate would do to the church. But I'm much more afraid of what will become of a church that goes on denying the full humanity of LGBTQ people and spending so much of its energy preserving that denial.

CNS PHOTO / JONATHAN ERNST, REUTERS

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TIMOTHY MATOVINA

# 'Wipe Away Many Tears'

## Our Lady of Guadalupe and the story of America

Five centuries ago, on Good Friday in 1519, Hernán Cortés and his band of conquistadores landed on the east coast of Mexico. Two years later they conquered the great Aztec city-state of Tenochtitlan (present-day Mexico City). A decade after that, Our Lady of Guadalupe reportedly appeared to the Indigenous neophyte Juan Diego. She charged him with the mission of communicating to Bishop Juan de Zumárraga her desire that a temple be built on the hill of Tepeyac, originally situated north of Mexico City though today within the bounds of the since-expanded metropolis.

The encounter and clash of the Old and the New Worlds in the Americas set off lively debates in Spain and its colonies on the legitimacy of military conquest and the autonomy and humanity of native peoples. Miguel Sánchez, author of the first Guadalupan theology with his 1648 book *Imagen de la Virgen María*, mirrored his contemporaries in his Eurocentric interpretation of the Spanish imperial project. Sánchez deemed Guadalupe Spain's "assistant conqueror" and attested that the "heathenism of the New World" was "conquered with her aid." His book established an enduring pattern of engaging Old World sacred texts and theological discourse to examine Guadalupe as a New World chapter in the spread of Christianity.

For Indigenous devotees, Guadalupe began as a paradoxical figure. She was a force whom Spaniards engaged to enhance native peoples' acceptance of colonial rule and missionary efforts, a protagonist in the Spanish efforts to displace Indigenous ways. But she was also a powerful mother and intercessor, a brown-skinned woman who provided continuity with an ancient Nahua worship site at Tepeyac. She worked miracles that alleviated suffering in Indigenous communities amidst the catastrophic effects of European diseases. The fact that natives were the first Guadalupan devotees with an explicit intercessory devotion to Juan Diego, who was not officially canonized until centuries later in 2002, underscores that at its core the apparition story is about Guadalupe's providential choosing of an Indigenous believer as her emissary.

Nonetheless, preachers who followed in Sánchez's wake increasingly pronounced triumphalist claims about Mary of Guadalupe's singular patronage of New Spain. They popularized the association between Guadalupe and the text of Psalm 147:20: "*Non fecit taliter omni nationi*" (God has not done this for any other nation). Drawing on this legacy, by the early nineteenth century both those struggling for Mexican independence and those fighting to preserve Spanish rule displayed hermeneutical savvy in their articulation of Guadalupan and biblical justifications for their conflicting causes. Insurgent priests as well as crown loyalists led troops who fought under Guadalupe's banner and attributed their victories in battle to her. The year after independence was secured, a preacher at the Guadalupe shrine acclaimed: "Believe me, compatriots: if we have conquered our sovereignty, if we have triumphed over our enemies, if the country of Anahuac [Mexico] breathes liberty, we owe it all to the Virgin of Tepeyac."

Subsequently, the conviction of Guadalupe's providential relation with Mexico continued to shape national consciousness. When Mexican prelates secured the authorization of Pope Leo XIII for a canonical coronation of Guadalupe in 1895, the chosen orator for the occasion, Bishop Crescencio Carrillo y Ancona of the diocese of Yucatán, asserted that "Mexican history is Guadalupan history." Diverging from the claims of his colonial predecessors, he averred that Guadalupe did not abet the Spanish imperial enterprise, but instead forged a new *mestizo* (mixed-race) people and nation. She halted both the cruelties of the former Aztec rulers and "the horrible and barbaric calamities of the warlike [Spanish] invaders" and "united and constituted into one people the two diverse castes, Indigenous and Spanish, and thus was born the present race that is truly American." Just as Yahweh accompanied Israel in the Ark of the Covenant and "made from an enslaved people a free and great nation," Guadalupe was, according to Carrillo y Ancona, the "Ark of the Divine Mexican Covenant" and Mexicans her chosen people.

Numerous contemporary devotees contend the foundational source for the Guadalupe apparition tradition is the Nahuatl-language *Nican mopohua* (a title derived from the document's first words, "here is recounted"), first published in Luis Laso de la Vega's 1649 treatise *Huei tlamahuiçoltica* (*By a Great Miracle*). The narrative hinges on its dramatic reversals. At first only Guadalupe has trust in Juan Diego; by the end, the bishop and his assistants believe he is truly her messenger. At the outset Juan Diego kneels before the bishop; in the end, the stooped *indio* stands erect while the bishop and his household kneel before him and venerate the image on his *tilma* (cloak). Throughout the account Juan Diego must journey to the center of the city from Tepeyac some three miles to the north; at the end, the bishop and his entourage accompany Juan Diego to the periphery of Tepeyac, where they will build the temple that Guadalupe requested. Symbolically—and physically—the presence of the ecclesial leadership and the church they are constructing is thus moved from the center of their capital city out to the margins among the Indigenous people.

*Juan Diego*, Laura Vazquez Rodriguez, created in commemoration of the Feast of Juan Diego for the Cathedral of Our Lady of Angels

Echoing insights such as these, theologians today increasingly seek to comprehend Guadalupe through the eyes of Juan Diego. They insist that Guadalupe can be fully understood only through her relationship with the marginalized one who was her partner in achieving her purposes. When preachers and theologians during the colonial and national periods made reference to Juan Diego, they typically presented him as a model for native conversion to Catholicism, or as the symbolic recipient of the heavenly favor bestowed on the people of Mexico. Conversely, their present-day counterparts give substantial attention to Juan Diego as the chosen protagonist of Guadalupe in confronting the plight of the marginalized. Women theologians, who tend to accentuate Guadalupe as a feminine manifestation of strength and liberation, have concurrently emphasized that she emancipates women as she did Juan Diego. These

articulations comprise a crucial shift in the Guadalupe tradition: from this perspective, Guadalupe and Juan Diego reveal a divine plan in which the lowly are entrusted with a mission and the powerful are instructed to accompany them. Through the eyes of Juan Diego, the ultimate significance of the *Nican mopohua* and the wider Guadalupe tradition is discovered in the way they are lived out among the poor today.

Pope Francis reinforced this perspective in his 2016 visit to the Guadalupe shrine at Tepeyac. He avowed that, as Mary had made her visitation to her kinswoman Elizabeth, so too she "wished also to come to the inhabitants of these American lands through the person of the Indian St. Juan Diego." The pope explained that the "preferential" love offered through Juan Diego "was not against anyone but rather in favor of everyone." He urged his audience to realize that in "visiting this Shrine, the same things that happened to Juan Diego can also happen to us." Then he commissioned them in the name of Our Lady of Guadalupe to be the Juan Diegos of today: "Today, she sends us out anew; as she did Juancito, today, she comes to tell us again: be my ambassador, the one I send to build many new shrines, accompany many lives, wipe away many tears.… Go and build my shrine, help me to lift up the lives of my sons and daughters, who are your brothers and sisters."

The evolving understanding of Guadalupe parallels the evolving story of the Americas, or as Pope John Paul II put it in his 1999 apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, the story of "America," an intentional use of the singular to underscore "all that is common to the peoples of the continent." Historical events addressed through the theologies and tradition of Guadalupe—conquest, attempts to Christianize natives, society-building, racial mixing, independence, and the demands for justice for marginalized groups—were momentous occurrences not only in Mexico. They marked the history of nations throughout the American hemisphere. Similarly, the historical trajectory of understanding Guadalupe's meaning provides an incisive interpretive key for assessing the past and present of Christianity and human flourishing in America.

We in the United States would do well to reexamine our own national history and current state through the lens of the Guadalupe tradition, as Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso did in his recent pastoral letter *Night Will Be No More*. Issued on the vigil of Indigenous Peoples' Day and at the Jornada por la Justicia national gathering of the Hope Border Institute and the Latinx Catholic Leadership Coalition in October 2019, the pastoral letter also followed upon the massacre of twenty-two people at a Walmart in El Paso last August. Bishop Seitz addresses "the legacy of hate and white supremacy." He testifies to the colonial conquest and exploitation of Indigenous peoples. He confesses with sadness the complicity of Catholics and church leaders in that oppression and in the deadly effects of institutionalized racism that subsequently plagued what is now the Southwest. He deplores the suffering of immigrants such as the Irish and Chinese, the Manifest Destiny ideology that drove the expansion of the United States, and the brutal treatment of Indigenous, African-American, and ethnic Mexican populations in Texas through the dispossession of lands and communities, enslavement, segregation, disenfranchisement, worker exploitation, and lynching. The El Paso Walmart massacre and the current xenophobic atmosphere of our nation must be comprehended within this history of racism.

Yet Bishop Seitz accentuates that "the people of the borderlands are not victims." They are a resilient and dignified people who have created community across borders, formed generations of leaders, and struggled to build a more just society. As she did with Juan Diego, Our Lady of Guadalupe has enabled them to confront the forces of dehumanization and embrace the mission to transform and humanize the world. Marveling at the ongoing capacity of Guadalupe to uplift her daughters and sons, Bishop Seitz states: "Only a woman such as this young, brown, mestiza empress, born on the edges of empire and who revealed herself anew on the edges of empire, could have convinced our people of the nearness and tenderness of God." He calls for a new flourishing of leaders who empower the victimized and not only avoid the evil of racism, but actively combat it in solidarity with those it afflicts.

A critical appropriation of our American history is foundational for renewing hope and enacting transformation. Marginalized groups in particular have been, in Bishop Seitz's words, "deprived of the narratives, land and religious traditions that gave their life consistency and meaning" and assailed with "new racialized narratives for self-understanding [that] were forced upon them." Consciously or not, racialized narratives of colonial conquest and Manifest Destiny justify white privilege, incite uncritical nationalism, and fracture human dignity. It is no surprise that numerous devotees in El Paso and beyond, especially those of marginal status, resonate with a rival story: Juan Diego's interactions with a loving mother, his election as an unexpected hero, his rejection, his unwavering faith, and his final vindication. Their fervent devotion intimates that for them this is the true story and hope of America. It reveals the truth of their human dignity and exposes the lie of experiences that diminish their fundamental sense of worth. It calls them to be leaders in confronting injustice and transforming church and society. It reminds the privileged that, like Bishop Zumárraga, Guadalupe demands we denounce false narratives that dehumanize, and listen instead to the cries and the wisdom of her struggling children.

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FREDERICK CHRISTIAN BAUERSCHMIDT

# Against Bourgeois Religion

For Johann Baptist Metz, the chief source of both danger and consolation in Christianity was Jesus himself.

The German theologian Johann Baptist Metz, who died on December 2 at the age of ninety-one, was born in Bavaria, served briefly as a sixteen-year-old in the *Wehrmacht* during the closing days of World War II, and spent several months in a POW camp in the eastern United States. He studied theology in Bamberg, Munich, and Innsbruck, and was ordained a priest in 1954. It was in Innsbruck that he became the student and collaborator of Karl Rahner. After completion of his studies, which included a doctoral dissertation on Thomas Aquinas, and a few years in pastoral ministry, he took up an academic position at the University of Münster in 1963, where he remained for the next thirty years, until his retirement.

Metz was one of the founders of the journal *Concilium*, which is often associated with the liberal or progressive wing of the post-conciliar church, but he was not so easily pigeonholed. He was deeply sympathetic to liberation theology and a politically engaged Christianity, critical of the excessive centralization in the church that he saw under Pope John Paul II, and rejected any "backward glancing vision which longs for a pre-Reformation Western Christianity." At the same time, Metz was not afraid to criticize other theologians who were identified as progressives, whether this was Rahner's theory of "anonymous Christianity" or the Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann's notion of divine suffering. At the end of the day, Metz was more interested in theological arguments than theological parties. When then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (who as archbishop of Munich had blocked Metz's appointment to the university there in 1979) was invited to an academic symposium that was to mark Metz's seventieth birthday, Hans Küng issued a public broadside denouncing Metz for having sold out to the ecclesiastical powers-that-be by agreeing to share a stage with the "Grand Inquisitor." Metz is reported to have commented tartly, "Sometimes Küng conducts himself like a second magisterium. To tell you the truth, one is enough, at least for me."

On a deeper level, it is difficult to identify Metz as a "progressive" because he was so skeptical of the notion of progress itself. For Metz, human history is riven with catastrophe and interruption. Like many German intellectuals of his generation, he was haunted by the specter of Auschwitz—not only by the fact that a putatively "advanced" culture like Germany had perpetrated such barbarity, but also by the knowledge that the people of his own deeply Catholic Bavarian village (including his own mother) had "not known" about a concentration camp a mere thirty miles away. He recalled asking himself "what sort of faith it must have been that allowed us to go on believing undisturbed during the Nazi time." He came to identify this sort of Christianity as "bourgeois religion," a religion that identifies the kingdom of God as the evolutionary outcome of human culture and not as the disturbing apocalyptic event

Johann Baptist Metz in 1970

that crashes into history. Wielding the unfashionable sword of the apocalyptic, which had been dismissed by other German theologians as the primitive garb in which true Christian eschatology wrapped itself, Metz skewered the pretensions of the comfortable Christianity that is "rid of danger but also rid of consolation."

For Metz, the chief source of both danger and consolation in Christianity was Jesus himself. Metz often quoted an apocryphal saying of Jesus that is recorded by Origen: "Who is close to me is close to the fire; who is far from me is far from the Kingdom." Metz noted, "It is dangerous to be close to Jesus, it threatens to set us afire, to consume us. And only in the face of this danger does the vision of the Kingdom of God that has come near in him light up." The dangerous memory of Jesus crucified and risen, carried by the traditions of the church (albeit in sometimes subterranean ways), is the subversion of all bourgeois religion. This memory also presses Christians, in imitation of the one whom they follow, to recognize that their way of life is not simply coextensive with the highest aspirations of modernity, and that they will often be rejected by the world, whether through mockery or suppression. But for Metz it is only in the face of such danger that consolation can be found, and a church that flees such danger, as so much modern Christianity does, is far from Jesus and therefore far from the joy of God's kingdom: "The present misery of our Christianity is not that we are considered as fools and rebels too often, but rather, practically never."

Like his mentor Rahner, Metz was more an essayist than a writer of books. But while one often senses that Rahner's essays were straining toward some grander systematic synthesis, Metz's writing stubbornly resists such ambitions. Indeed, not only were Metz's books quite clearly collections of essays, the essays themselves often seemed like collections of aphorisms. In style, and perhaps in content, he is closer to the book of Ecclesiastes, Pascal, and Walter Benjamin than to Rahner. His chief contribution to theology is not so much a system, or even a set of positions, but a body of lapidary phrases that haunt and disturb theological discourse: "dangerous memory," "interruption," "bourgeois religion," "the cult of the makeable." These phrases raise more questions than answers, which is only fitting given that Metz believed that "theology is a culture of questions, not of answers." Metz enacted in the very form of his theology his principled rejection of any theological impulse to adopt a totalizing view of history.

I don't think that any future theologians will be "Metzians" in the way that one might be a "Thomist" or a "Rahnerian." Metz simply did not aspire to be that sort of theologian. But it is difficult to imagine that future theologians who read him will not think differently about the apocalyptic character of history, will not ask difficult questions about bourgeois religion, will not feel more deeply the danger and consolation of the memory of Jesus. And that is a worthy legacy for any theologian.

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SUEDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG PHOTO / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ANDREW J. BACEVICH

# The New Abbess

## Encountering 'hidden fruitfulness' in dark times

Indulge me in this statement of the obvious: these are difficult days in which to be a Roman Catholic. The tidal wave of secularization and the reconceptualization of freedom as radical autonomy have swamped the citadel of faith. The institutional church is today mired in seemingly permanent crisis. And despite the cheeriness of the current pope, hope is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. That Francis himself may be inadvertently playing into the hands of the church's adversaries, as some critics charge, is not beyond the realm of possibility. For those of us in the pews, being a Catholic hasn't been much fun lately.

In my long-ago days as a student attending parochial school, the nuns taught us that faith is a gift. All these years later, I have concluded that, for me at least, it is more than a gift but also less. On the one hand, being Catholic has become central to my identity. It forms an indelible part of who I am, part of my birthright handed down by my parents and grandparents. I would no more abandon the church than I would abandon my country. To do so would be an act of betrayal. The very thought is anathema. On the other hand, remaining a Catholic today is necessarily a choice as well. There are, after all, other options. So I stay because I choose to do so, if only out of sheer stubbornness. I do not reproach the multitudes who bail out or just drift away. But I am sticking.

Still, sticking hasn't been easy over the past couple of decades. This has especially been the case for those of us who worship in the once-celebrated Archdiocese of Boston, the very epicenter of the clerical scandals that have rocked the church in the present century. So when some occasion arises to remind an ordinary churchgoer of what the faith can and should be, it is cause for celebration. Recently, my wife and I participated in one such occasion, the installation of a new abbess at Mount St. Mary's Abbey in Wrentham, Massachusetts.

Members of this community belong to the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, perhaps more familiarly known as Trappistines. My wife's older sister Maureen, now Sr. Robert, joined the Trappistines more than a half-century ago. Apart from sojourns in India and Rome, she has lived at Mount St. Mary's ever since. This community of several dozen nuns supports itself by making and selling candy, which you ought to buy. Sr. Robert does not work in the candy factory, however. Instead, well into her seventies, she tends a small flock of sheep.

The reference to Strict Observance in the order's formal name is misleading, in my view. Among other things, Trappistine life is not quite as strict as it was when Sr. Robert professed her vows. More to the point, a phrase like strict observance conjures up something akin to my long-ago plebe year at West Point: daily misery inflicted by petty tyrants of sadistic bent. While members of the community do still adhere to a demanding daily routine centered on *ora et labora*, the dominant attitude that they convey is one of effervescent joy in serving the Lord. That joy rubs off on everyone who encounters them, very much including me.

Joy was much in evidence as Mother Sofia Millican, having been duly elected by the community, was formally installed as abbess. Here in the realm where Cardinal Archbishop Bernard Law's diktats were once indeed law, Sunday Mass can tend to be a bit perfunctory. I don't mean to suggest that we parishioners are just going through the motions, but the atmosphere can fall well short of electric. The liturgy this day may not have qualified as electric, but it was rich and immensely satisfying.

The chapel at Mount St. Mary's is small, simple, and elegant. On this occasion, it was packed, not only with members of the community but with other religious and lay people. The Most Reverend Robert P. Reed, auxiliary bishop of Boston, presided. (When I was in the army long, long ago, I was, as a rule, not particularly fond of generals. There were exceptions, of course. So too today, I find that I am not particularly fond of bishops. In the case of Bishop Reed, I am willing to make an exception. Conveying an appropriate sense of dignity, he also contributed eloquence and self-deprecating humor. I foresee further promotions ahead.)

The liturgy itself lasted for more than ninety minutes, or almost twice as long as the typical Sunday Mass. While at worship (not necessarily when making candy or shoveling sheep dung), Trappistines move with a singular serenity and grace. They do not fret. They do not rush. They are, to use a cliché that I would otherwise be sure to avoid, entirely in the moment. This was the spirit that permeated the chapel and settled on all in attendance.

Our nine-year-old grandson attended with us. Gabriel tends to be on the rambunctious side, his life revolving largely around sports. He is the kind

Mount St. Mary's Abbey, Wrentham, Massachusetts

of kid who can get restless after four innings watching the Red Sox at Fenway. In this instance, however, he astonished us by remaining raptly attentive throughout the service. He even did his best to participate in the singing, though challenged by Latin texts from the centuries-old Cistercian Gradual.

The music was beautiful and there was incense in abundance. Bishop Reed's homily was thoughtful and on point. Yet central to the service was his interrogation of Mother Sofia, asking her to affirm her commitment to leading her sisters in accordance with the laws of the church and the Rule of St. Benedict. To each of several questions, the new abbess—so young that she was not yet born when Sr. Robert entered the order—answered with a reassuringly firm "yes." Satisfied with her responses, Bishop Reed conferred on her a special blessing and as symbols of her office presented her with a copy of the Rule, a ring, and a pastoral staff. With that, the service proceeded to its conclusion.

Festivities ensued as the community treated its guests to lunch, the menu notably including excellent beer produced by the Trappist monks of St. Joseph's Abbey in nearby Spencer, Massachusetts. We used the moment to catch up with Sr. Robert, whose guard llama has recently died of old age. The llama protects the sheep from the threat of coyotes. Procuring a replacement has become a priority.

When we did finally leave the premises, we felt nourished in both soul and body. In his homily, Bishop Reed had quoted from *Vita Consecrata,* John Paul II's 1996 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation. In that document, the pope credited the men and women who today keep alive the ancient monastic tradition with "endowing history with hidden fruitfulness." Every time we visit Mount Saint Mary's we encounter that hidden fruitfulness. In a dark time, the abbey functions as our own guard llama of sorts, protecting us from despair.

"Do not forget the works of the Lord." Thus did the responsorial psalm that followed the First Reading admonish us during Mother Sofia's installation. At this small but vibrant abbey, the works of the Lord remain vividly on display.

**ANDREW J. BACEVICH** *is president of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. His new book,* The Age of Illusions, *will be published this month.*

# *Two poems by Brian Swann*

## COMPAGNI

I look over the parapet where trees hang
rags and condoms like ornaments

from the last flood, and try to kick myself
free of porno sheets wrapping round my legs

from the wind of Lungotevere traffic
a boy tries selling car-mats to and a man

offers mimosa blossoms whose scent drowns
in exhaust and alluvial dust puffing from

under my feet each step I take until I reach
Da Giggetto whose walls feature a large faded photo

signed "Elio and Enzo, 1943," two men in uniform
atop the smoking shell of a Carro Armato,

one, large and maternal, blowing a kiss, the other,
a wizened child, squinting at the camera, nothing

behind them, unless you count the desert's
merge of sand with sand.

## HISTORY

You can work it for all you're worth but it will still be
whatever it is, calling across vastness in waves

seeming to stand still yet falling capaciously, moving
into and out of its own shadow so it needs

no dimensions for light to enter at all angles, catch on
anything, snag edges, flow over stone, filter

through trees with motes and minims as we try to find
a way in since there's no way out, here where

you are part of the score, a kind of fiction, a presence
making music of specs and scraps that come together

like the music that made us, the dance of more than we are
or face to face, I make it, it makes me in a room

of mirrors facing each other spilling images like a spool
of film on the cutting-room floor, frames unraveling

like streets that run into other streets, criss-crossing
frayed threads on a broken loom, mirrors reflecting

flakes like quail in winter when you flush them
and they merge with the snow.

**BRIAN SWANN***'s most recent poetry collection is* Sunday Out of Nowhere: New and Selected Poems *(Sheep Meadow Press) and his latest fiction is* Not the Real Marilyn Monroe *(MadHat Press). He teaches at The Cooper Union in New York City.*

ARTICLE

# A Cathedral Not Made by Hands

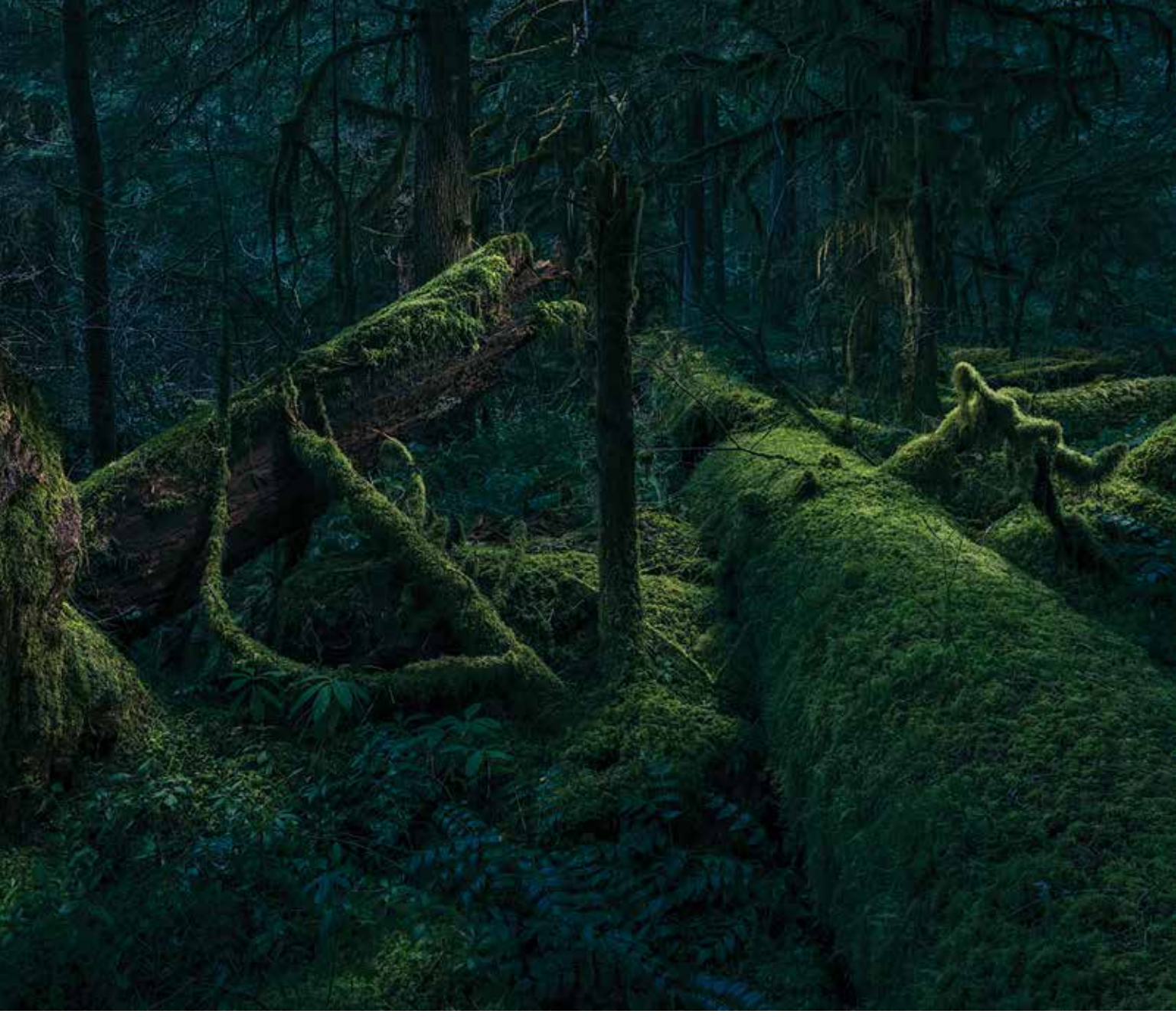
**Vincent Miller**

*What an experimental forest can teach us about the 'integral ecology' of* Laudato si'

Photographer David Paul Bayles focuses on landscapes where the needs of forests and human pursuits often collide, sometimes coexist, and on occasion find harmony. His connection with trees was forged in the mid-seventies when he worked for four years as a logger in the Sierra Nevada mountains. While attending photography school in Santa Barbara, Bayles became committed to environmentalism. Last year, he was awarded an ongoing residency at the 16,000-acre H. J. Andrews Experimental Forest near Blue River, Oregon. These photographs of the forest are from his collection *Old Growth Dialogue.*

In *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis offers a vision of moral responsibility rooted in awareness of the world around us. He points to St. Francis, who "looked with love" on all creatures, as a model. He writes of an "attitude of the heart, one which approaches life with serene attentiveness, which is capable of being fully present" to everyone and everything. And he also calls for an "intense dialogue" between religion and science, which has its own "gaze." The H. J. Andrews Experimental Forest in Oregon, one of the world's most studied ecosystems, offers an especially rich opportunity for such dialogue. Here scientists have cultivated their own gaze of "serene attentiveness." What can theology learn by looking with scientists at such a complex ecosystem?

Entering an old-growth forest can be overwhelming. The sheer, tangled abundance of life is shocking. If John Muir was right to describe these as "cathedrals," they are messy and riotous ones. Massive trees, centuries old, rise from heaps of moss and ferns and disappear into the canopy above. Life overlaps everywhere, leaving no surface bare. Some trees are so covered with moss, lichen, or fungus that it's difficult to see their bark or even needles. Curtains of damp moss hush sound. The scent of conifers and the earthy must of soil fill the air. Underfoot, the ground is soft and deep. There are so many layers, in every shade of green, that it is difficult to take it all in. There are hints at a timescale beyond human reckoning. Moss grows very slowly; yet here it covers just



about everything. A tree bends toward an opening in the canopy that it filled centuries ago.

Encountering this riot of life can be like walking into a loud party full of many conversations (and more than a few fights), or arriving in the middle of the harmonies and dissonance of a complex symphony. It is tempting to focus on just one thing, to simplify. I reach out to touch an ancient Douglas fir, instinctively choosing a bare patch of bark stripped of moss. But the tree is far more than a single being. It hosts hundreds of plants and animals and depends on countless ecological interactions. Thinking like an individual, I miss the relationships. Ecology, like community, requires a gaze attentive to connection.

These were once called "decadent forests." It's easy to see why. The stunning vertical rise of firs, cedars, and hemlocks is coupled with so much falling and decay. Each day looks like the aftermath of a storm. Strips of lichen, moss, branches, and entire trees litter the floor. All this is being rotted by fungi and chewed by bugs. Fungus sprouts from enormous standing dead snags, revealing the rot within and impending collapse. What at first sight seems tumbling terrain—a hummock of ferns or even a small terrace—on closer look is revealed to be stumps or fallen trees decaying beneath blankets of moss. Life and death coincide, overlap, and interpenetrate.

For much of the twentieth century, forest managers' explicit goal was to clear-cut decadent forests, burn the underbrush, and herbicide the soil. They would then plant orderly monoculture plantations of Douglas fir where trees would grow straight, fast, and healthy, freed from competition with undergrowth and safe from the infections harbored by diseased trees and rotting logs. Yes, they wanted timber, but they also wanted order:

The H. J. Andrews was once dedicated to the study of logging and forestry management with the goal of increasing efficiency and productivity. Along the way (and not without conflict) the applied science of the logging industry gave way to the science of ecology. A few decades later, the forest also became a place of inquiry for writers, artists, and musicians.

a simple order they could understand and control.

The Andrews is one of the places where scientists dared to gaze more attentively; and out of that emerged a revolution in understanding. Far from being "decadent," these "old-growth" forests possess their own complex order as mature, biodiverse ecosystems. What appears as decay is essential to ecological flourishing.

That lichen cascading from the treetops—*Lobaria oregana*—turns out to be crucial. Nitrogen is a particular problem in a dense forest; the canopy closes after about a century, blocking the sun from nitrogen-fixing plants while trees are still young. Without this essential nutrient, they would fade long before reaching maturity. As the canopy closes, this lichen slowly establishes itself. Once established, it fills the gap, each year capturing tons of nitrogen per square mile that enters the soil as fallen strips decay on the forest floor.

Moss covering branches and trunks is often as old as the trees themselves. It plays an important role in capturing nutrients from the air and slowing the flow of rainfall down the tree so that nutrients remain near the trees' roots. Rotting fungus, and bugs that consume dead trees, convert cellulose and lignin into soil nutrients that feed the astounding rise and near-millennial lifespan of these massive trees. Rot is itself life; there is more living tissue—bacteria, fungus, bugs—in a fallen tree than in a living one. Rising and falling, growth and rot, life and death are literally interconnected here.

None of this is obvious to a casual or even sincerely attentive observer. Much of it takes place outside the range of human sensation. Scientists struggle to broaden our scales of time and space in order to understand the hidden cycles of life. Learning the role of the lichen required chemical analysis and finding a way to work in the canopy, far above ground, to painstakingly measure the amount that grows on each branch. Knowledge of the cycle of log decay comes from an ongoing decomposition study that will follow the progress of fallen trees through the entire two hundred years it takes for a log to become soil. Gas emissions and fluid runoff are measured and analyzed. Bacteria, fungi, and bugs are microscopically cataloged, and their progress through tree tissue is carefully measured. This devotion and commitment from multiple generations of scientists certainly justifies considering the scientific a form of "serene attentiveness."

This work attending to the fullness of creation has revealed astounding complexity. As we walk through the forest, we notice plants and animals around us, but often we literally miss the forest's interconnections for the trees. The greatest part of its biodiversity lies below ground, where thousands upon thousands of species of worms, arthropods, and insects live, each hosting a different bacterial community in its gut. We used to think of soil as a test tube full of chemicals, but now know that it's a complex biological network; we are only beginning to understand its thousands of parts. These are "trophic" networks: who eats what and whom. The complexity goes far beyond predator and prey. Everything from a fallen evergreen needle to a tree is consumed, and the droppings of the consumers are consumed by yet other species through cycles upon cycles.

Below ground lives another complex web that facilitates one of the most astounding sets of relationships in the forest: mycorrhizal fungi. Unlike saprophytic fungi which live on decaying matter,

mycorrhizal fungi live in symbiosis with living plants. Scientists have known these soil fungi are important for more than a century. Only in the past few decades, however, have they found ways to study the complexity of these relationships in detail. Electron microscopes show that mycorrhizal fungi filaments surround and penetrate plants' root hairs. On the most basic level, trees share sugars with the fungus; the fungus extends their root systems' reach a thousand-fold into microscopic nooks and crannies. The underground portion of fungi is much larger than the mushrooms we see. DNA analysis reveals that they can extend for hundreds of yards or even miles, linking the root systems of many trees, including different species, into a network that shares nutrients, water, chemical alerts, and even electrical signals. Using carbon-14 isotopes, Susan Simard famously found evidence of Douglas firs sharing sugar with birches in the spring and fall, and receiving sugar back when they leafed out in the summer. Older trees not only nurse their young through these networks; they serve as anchor points of complex networks that link entire stands of trees. One study found as many as sixty-five separate fungus species forming root networks in Douglas fir forests.

This research is breathtaking. Far from a ruthless competition of individuals for water and nutrients, we find diverse communities supporting their members. Vast, complex, multi-species networks thrive by sharing resources and information. The vocabulary used is as consonant with Catholic social thought as the reality it describes. The technical term used for these multispecies networks is "cooperative guilds." There is a common good in the forest.

We learn three connected lessons in an old-growth forest: creation is profoundly interrelated; interrelatedness is not simply a truth about ecology that we observe, but a truth about ourselves in which we participate; and an ethos of attentiveness can bring the limits of our knowledge into our moral imagination.

The first lesson of the forest is scientific confirmation of the key theme of *Laudato si'*—"everything is interconnected." These few remaining intact ecosystems serve as sacraments of the Holocene. In them, we can find a kind of anamnesis of the living complexity of the world in which we evolved, and develop an appreciation for the gift that birthed us. This is not to gloss over the hard truths of evolution by forcing ecology to narrate a secular Eden. Predation and parasitism are as prevalent as symbiosis and mutualism. The density of relationship is, however, unmistakable.

The Andrews is an ancient forest wired for the future, dotted with highly sensitive instruments taking measurements every five minutes. Like the watershed, this data converges into a stream, flowing down the mountain to Oregon State University.

No individual plant or animal, and indeed no species, is an island. Ecological niches aren't really patches of ground defended from competitors, but multidimensional relationships. Remove one part and the rest can falter. For thousands of years, humans have been cutting down the great temperate and tropical forests that once covered much of the earth, resulting not just in the loss of trees, but in the destruction of massive, complex ecosystems.

The effects of deforestation can take years, decades, and even centuries to appear. On ecological timescales, the agriculture we replace them with often proves frightfully short-lived. In so many places, deserts now spread where forests once flourished. The narrow scope of what we value has remade the world. That impoverishment unfolds today in what scientists are calling the sixth mass-extinction event—human activity is eliminating species on a scale that ranks with the previous catastrophic die-offs that punctuate the geological record. We will bequeath this impoverishment to our own children, and to the rest of the species forced to live on the planet we understood too little to share.

We don't simply learn about the world around us, however, when we study these forests; we also learn the truth that we ourselves are part of a creation that reflects the relational character of the triune God. For this reason, *Laudato si'* connects ecological attentiveness to a Trinitarian spirituality:

> The divine Persons are subsistent relations, and the world, created according to the divine model, is a web of relationships. This leads us not only to marvel at the manifold connections existing among creatures, but also to discover a key to our own fulfilment.

The beauty of the forest bears the truth of ecological interconnection. This turns out to be a moral truth as well.

> The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. In this way, they make their own that trinitarian dynamism that God imprinted in them when they were created. Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity that flows from the mystery of the Trinity.

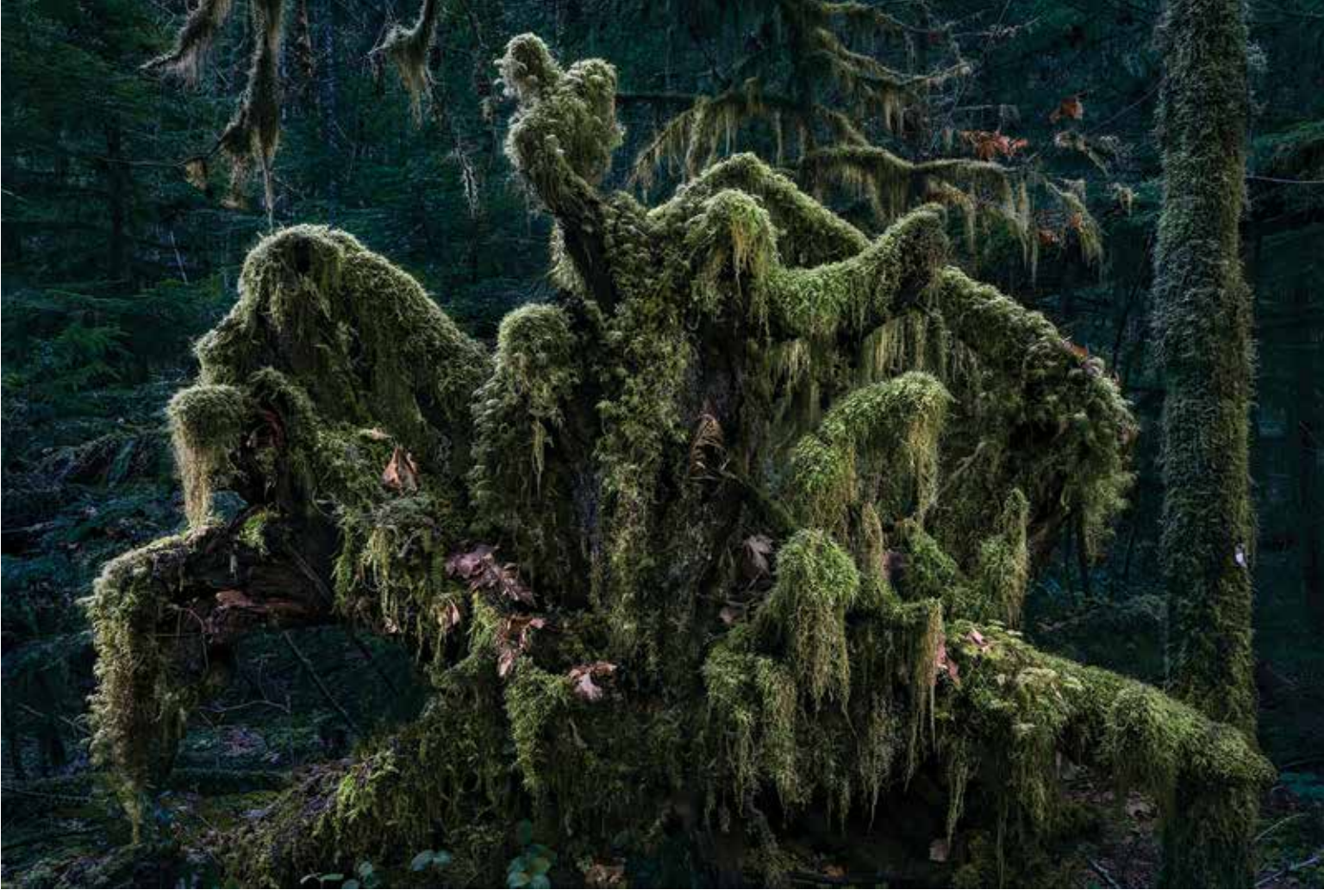
We are created amidst communion, for communion with God along with the rest of creation.

Forests and the scientists who study them do more than confirm our religious beliefs about communion. They also challenge us to recognize the ways our individualism runs even deeper than we realize, untouched by our professions of faith. We really prefer to ignore the interconnection between decay and life and what this tells us about our connections with others. While we may thrill at the networked community facilitated by the hyphae of "good" mycorrhizal fungi, we shudder at the penetrating tendrils of the fungi of rot. Yet the towering bodies of giant trees are composed of the bodies of countless dead, decayed ancestral generations. As are we.

"Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." The Ash Wednesday admonition is a reference to Genesis in which God fashions Adam from "dust" or "clay." We generally read this as an expression of our nothingness without God's animating Spirit. Yet some Scripture scholars argue the Hebrew here can and should be rendered *soil*. Indeed, Adam's very name is a play on the Hebrew word for soil. As the whole arc of the Eden story presumes, God creates and places us within a system of relationships. Our refusal harms them all: "Cursed is the soil because of you." What if we prayed the more biblically accurate: "Remember you are soil, and to soil you shall return"? Our bodies are not our own, separate from relationships human and natural, but part of cycles that require we give back what we take, even our flesh. "Take…this is my body" resonates in places we seldom imagine. Our refusal is institutionalized in our modern death ritual of shutting "our" bodies off from the rest of creation in metal and concrete boxes, where indeed, rather than return to the soil, they decay to dust.

The final lesson is perhaps the most challenging. Here we learn how very difficult it is to be attentive. On a moral level, we must struggle with the objectifying gaze of what Francis calls the "technocratic paradigm," that sees the rest of creation as a "mere object subjugated to arbitrary human domination." The Synod of the Amazon's proposed definition of "ecological sin" focuses precisely on ignoring and transgressing the "interdependence…and networks of solidarity among creatures." From the very few remaining fragments of old-growth forests, one need not look far to find clear-cuts and monoculture tree plantations which manifest the devastation that such a sinful view of creation produces.

But our moral blindness arises from our finitude as much as our sin. Creation is an astoundingly complex web of relationships. Most of these are not easily perceived by the ordinary range of human perception. To play on but one of our limited senses, if the forest is a symphony, its harmonies and dissonances include notes far higher and lower than we can easily imagine, let alone hear: from the atomic vibrations of photosynthesis to



bass notes sounding in the millennial rise and fall of trees. Scientists turn to chemistry, DNA analysis, and electron microscopes to study dimensions of the life of the forest far beyond the range of our natural perception. The difficulties of this scientific work alert us to just how much we miss.

The interplay of knowledge, imagination, and grace lets us encounter the astounding complexity of forests more fully. Out of this interplay comes moments when awareness flickers; each plant, rock, and decaying leaf reverberates in its manifold interconnections. Green deepens into the *viriditas* that Hildegard von Bingen named the Spirit's work in creation and we catch a glimmer of the harmony that surrounds us. Full comprehension escapes us, as both complexity and grace are beyond our ken. But the more knowledge we have of particulars, the more our understanding of complexity grows; and with this, awareness of evermore dimensions that we do not comprehend.

We need to incorporate such awareness of our limited perception into our everyday moral imagination. We act powerfully in the world, seldom knowing the full consequences of our actions. We have been doing so for millennia. The disappearance of large animals from ecosystems has been the hallmark of human activity since the Pleistocene. Humans are the great disrupters: hunting animals too large for any animal predator and reworking entire landscapes with agriculture. Such ignorance is fundamental to the global market system, which works precisely by reducing the complexities of the ecological, social, and cultural costs of production to a price signal.

Our disruptions have now reached the planetary scale. Our future, and the future of the countless species along for the ride with us, depends upon our cultivating a sense of our ignorance and a corresponding hesitance to act in haste. Will we keep our eyes closed in indifference or open them to the astounding complexity of creation and learn anew how to respond in love?

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# Strange Gods

**William T. Cavanaugh**

## *Idolatry in the twenty-first century*

A hundred years ago, the famed German sociologist Max Weber published a revised edition of his classic work. Inserted into the new edition were a few uses of the word *Entzauberung*, a word that did not appear in the first edition. The word was meant to describe the general condition of the modern Western world. *Zauber* is the German word for "magic"; *Entzauberung* is literally the "un-magic-ing" of the world. It is usually translated "disenchantment." Although Weber himself used the word sparingly, it has taken on a life of its own. Many people believe it captures something essential about our present condition. In his exploration of the causes of secularization in the West, philosopher Charles Taylor has written, "Everyone can agree that one of the big differences between us and our ancestors of five hundred years ago is that they lived in an 'enchanted' world and we do not." Our ancestors lived in a world inhabited by gods and demons, ghosts and angels, wood sprites and saints. The boundaries between the material and the spiritual were permeable, and the immanent world made frequent contact with the transcendent. The premodern world was full of what Taylor calls "charged objects," such as saints' relics, that had the power to alter reality. Today, we live in a disenchanted world, devoid of divine or demonic spirits, devoid of mystery, a world with no ordered meaning. Or so the story goes.

In Weber's view, disenchantment was the end result of a long process of rationalization, of which science and capitalism were the principal drivers. Weber was himself a rationalist, who described himself as "unmusical" with regard to religion. But he did not simply celebrate the process of rationalization and disenchantment. He thought that the technical advances of modernity came at a price, and he feared that modern people had become "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved." *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* ends with a melancholy description of the "iron cage" of modernity, a heartlessly efficient machine from which all enchantment had been ruthlessly eliminated, for better and for worse.

For an example of how this machine functions in practice, consider an Amazon "fulfillment center," or warehouse. Not even Weber could have foreseen the lengths to which Amazon has taken rationalization. At an Amazon fulfillment center, poorly paid "associates," who are often temporary workers with no benefits, scurry among bins retrieving and packing just about anything that can be imagined. A handheld device keeps track of their movements. After it directs them to the next item of merchandise, a timer starts: twenty-seven seconds to scan the next item four aisles over, for example. The device warns them if they are falling behind, and keeps track of their "pick rate." Falling behind, calling in sick, and other offenses can cost a worker his or her job. Some "associates" have resorted to urinating in bottles so they won't need bathroom breaks.

In January 2018 Amazon received patents on a wristband that can track a warehouse worker's arm movements. An Amazon spokesperson presented the wristband as a boon for workers: "This idea, if implemented in the future, would improve the process for our fulfillment associates. By moving equipment to associates' wrists, we could free up their hands from scanners and their eyes from computer screens." But according to James Bloodworth, who worked at an Amazon fulfillment center for six months and described his experiences in *Hired: Six Months Undercover in Low-Wage Britain* (2018), the company's real goal was not to make the lives of its workers easier. "It was all obsessed with productivity.… They started treating human beings as robots, essentially. If it proves cheaper to replace humans with machines, I assume they will do that." In the Amazon warehouse, Weber's description of the "iron cage" seems fully vindicated.

But this is only one side of the story. For the consumer, the purchase of nearly anything via Amazon is nothing short of magical. Images of millions of products can be summoned onto a screen. One can spend hours lost in a virtual environment of endless abundance. A few clicks later the desired product appears on your doorstep, like magic. If you have the money, or at least access to credit, you can summon almost anything from anywhere in the world, abracadabra. The entire production process—the sourcing of raw materials, the manufacturing and transportation, the packing and delivering—is invisible to the consumer, as are the people involved in this process. All we see are images of the shiny finished products on a screen, and then the products themselves on our doorsteps.


idolatry

So it seems that there are two sides to our economy: a rationalized, disenchanted side typified by heartless efficiency, and an enchanted side still filled with charged objects and magic. In fact, these are really two sides of the same coin. Each of them implies the other.

Weber argued that religion is the original agent of rationalization, but also that rationalization eventually pushes religion out of the public sphere. Many summaries of Weber's argument stop there, at the disenchantment of the world. But Weber also suggested that rationalization produces a new form of enchantment, a kind of "polytheism" of impersonal gods, which include the state and the market.

Let's begin with the first part of his argument. Weber regards magic as a primitive form of religion. Early cultures practiced magic to try to control nature and mitigate its various dangers; if we perform a certain dance, it will bring rain on our crops. Magic was this-worldly—not ethical, but transactional. It tried to coerce or bribe the spirits that lived in material things. There is a sort of rationality in this quid pro quo. When the great salvation religions erupted in the Axial Age, however, they introduced a new kind of rationalization. The gods were now personal and otherworldly, transcending the material world, and so interactions with them took on an ethical tone. Such gods were universal rather than local, and this gave rise to the notion of stable and universal laws that govern nature and society. A rational social order was complemented by an intellectual order that answered the human need for coherent meaning. People needed a way to deal with senseless suffering. So salvation religions developed the myth of a savior and an ethical system in which the gods could punish the unjust and reward the righteous. Since the righteous often suffer in this life, while the unjust often prosper, explanations were sought outside of the present world. Present suffering was explained by the sins of a former life or by one's ancestors, or an afterlife was posited to ensure that the guilty were punished and the righteous rewarded after death.

For Weber, this puts salvation religions in a state of permanent tension with the world, which leads to the second part of his argument: the more religion becomes rationalized, the more it becomes otherworldly, while the worldly spheres of politics, economics, family, sex, etc. take on increasing autonomy. Worldly activities like business and war cannot meet the high ethical standards of the great salvation religions, so the religious person either flees from the world into mysticism or becomes a worldly ascetic, like the Puritan. According to Weber, the Puritan accepts the ultimate meaninglessness of this world but tries to work out his salvation in inner dialogue with God while following his worldly vocation as a businessman. This is how Protestantism led to capitalism. For the Puritan, the Catholic sacraments were mere magic, an attempt to manipulate God. The Reformation swept the world clean of such idols, so that God would be all in all. But removing God from the material world to protect God's holiness would eventually lead to the disenchantment of all worldly pursuits. Science, for example, deals only in facts; it cannot produce meaning. Capitalism responds to whatever the market dictates; values are irrelevant to it. The bureaucracy of the state seeks efficiency; it does not respond to the will of God.

For a lot of people, what they know of Weber ends there, in disenchantment. But Weber himself took a third step, writing not only of the godlessness of the modern world, but also of its "polytheism." Weber was convinced that human beings have an elemental need for meaning. For Weber, the split between fact on the one hand and meaning or value on the other is both a reality and a serious problem, because we still urgently want to know what the meaning of our lives is. According to Weber, "Science is meaningless, because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important for us: 'What shall we do and how shall we live?'" Weber rejects the idea that we can return to religion; he regards that route as suitable only for the person too weak to face "the fundamental fact that he is destined to live in a godless and prophetless time." But Weber translates the question "What shall we do and how shall we live?" into the question "Which of the warring gods should we serve? Or should we serve perhaps an entirely different god, and who is he?" Polytheism is a direct consequence of rationalization. The divorce between fact and value means that "the various value spheres of the world stand in irreconcilable conflict with each other," with no factual basis for adjudicating their rival claims. There is no rational way to resolve such conflicts. We must take the irrational leap of simply choosing some values rather than others. Weber writes:

> We live as did the ancients when their world was not yet disenchanted of its gods and demons, only we live in a different sense. As Hellenic man at times sacrificed to Aphrodite and at other times to Apollo, and, above all, as everybody sacrificed to the gods of his city, so do we still nowadays, only the bearing of man has been disenchanted and denuded of its mystical but inwardly genuine plasticity.

Here it is important to note that Weber seems to see no difference between the observable behavior of people in the ancient world and that of people in the modern world. Weber continues, "Many old gods ascend from their graves; they are disenchanted and hence take the form of impersonal forces. They strive to gain power over our lives and again they resume their eternal struggle with one another."

In Weber's view, Apollo has been replaced by impersonal forces like capitalism, but "gods" is not a casual metaphor. As Weber says, "they strive to gain power over our lives." Weber believed the individual has the freedom to choose among the various gods on offer, but this choice is made in the context of unchosen constraints. The new gods we can choose must struggle not only against each other, but against the gods we do *not* choose. Weber writes of how Puritan asceticism

> did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt.

Weber concludes that "material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history."

In the nineteenth century, figures like Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche thought that doing away with God or the gods would lead to liberation for human beings. Humanity would finally take the reins of its own destiny. Weber was much more pessimistic. He emphasized the fragmented nature of human meaning in the modern world and the power and inertia of large social institutions. Together, these make complete liberation impossible. Weber seems to agree with Marx and Nietzsche that there is no pre-given order, that we humans are making it all up as we go. For Weber, however, human technical prowess produces wonders that end up dominating us. As the monster says to Dr. Frankenstein, "You are my creator, but I am your master; obey!"

So the gods eliminated by rationalization return in a different form to rule over us. In the political sphere, Weber describes how nation-states employ rationalized violence to protect borders, pushing religious scruples—like the pacifism of the Sermon on the Mount—into the private sphere of values. But war then out-religions religion, creating a new form of devotion to the nation-state. War, Weber writes, "makes for an unconditionally devoted and sacrificial community among the combatants and releases an active mass compassion and love for those who are in need.... In general, religions can show comparable achievements only in heroic communities professing an ethic of brotherliness." Weber goes on to argue that the state does a better job than religion at giving meaning to death. In the economic sphere, Weber describes capitalism as the height of rationalization, precisely in its depersonalization of transactions. Money is "the most abstract and 'impersonal' element that exists in human life." Weber adds, "For this reason one speaks of the rule of 'capital' and not that of capitalists." Making money is no longer just a means to serve the life of people: "Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life." In short, we continue to serve gods every bit as transcendent and irrational as the gods of old. The holy has not disappeared but migrated from the church to the state and the market.

**When the sheer volume of things in the world took a quantum leap in the nineteenth century because of mass production, people needed to be taught, as one advertising manual put it in 1901, that "they have wants which they did not recognize before."**

What about the Amazon packages that land on our doorsteps? Do they belong to a realm of disenchantment, of rationalized materialism? Marx did not think so. When a table is made for use, there is nothing mysterious about it. But when it becomes a commodity for exchange, Marx writes, "it is changed into something transcendent." It becomes a strange thing, "abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties." As commodities, things float free from both the material conditions of their production and from their own physical properties as use values:

> In order...to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labor.

By "fetishism" Marx meant more than people obsessing about material things. He meant that material things become enchanted and take on a life of their own. When an object becomes a commodity, its value depends not on its usefulness, but on what it can be exchanged for. A contemporary example: despite widespread hunger, farmers dump milk and the government warehouses cheese in order to support the price of dairy. What matters is the exchange value—the price—not the use value. Cheese is not primarily food for people to consume, but a commodity to be exchanged for money. Because their value is expressed relative to other commodities, Marx says, commodities establish social relations among themselves.

And as commodities take on life, life is drained away from actual people. Hungry people don't count in the market unless they have money, and workers are regarded as "labor costs," which need to be minimized. Commodification also hides the conditions of work. All the consumer sees in the store or on Amazon's website is the commodity and its price. It takes a Herculean effort to uncover the people who actually made the product and delivered it, and the conditions in which they worked.

Before the industrial revolution, people made nearly everything they had in their homes, and what they didn't make was usually made by people they knew. Things were closely linked to their makers and to their use value. Now we make almost nothing for ourselves, and buy almost everything we

use. It is hard to overestimate what a change this is in how we relate to the material world and to other people. When the sheer volume of things in the world took a quantum leap in the nineteenth century because of mass production, people needed to be taught, as one advertising manual put it in 1901, that "they have wants which they did not recognize before."

If we look at the history of advertising, we see how merchandise took flight from the material world and entered into the realm of transcendence. In the nineteenth century, advertising was largely informational: you can buy shoes at John H. Johnson's shop. By the early twentieth century, advertising had become more about persuading than informing, but it was still closely related to the physical product. An ad might show a picture of a shoe and then describe its virtues. The objective would be to convince the reader that this was a comfortable, reasonably priced, well-made, and stylish shoe. Such an ad would appeal both to the consumer's rational sense of use value—shoes should be easy to walk in and not fall apart too quickly—and also to the buyer's more intangible sense of fashion, of being recognized by others as stylish and as having the good sense to buy a reputable brand.

By the mid-twentieth century, there had been a shift further away from use value and toward the more intangible and spiritual aspirations of the consumer for freedom, sex, prestige, recognition, and other forms of transcendence. A shoe might still appear in a shoe ad, but there would no longer be any mention of its use value. Indeed, there might not be any mention of the shoe itself. Under the influence of Freud, Pavlov, and other psychologists, advertisers began to appeal not to the conscious self but to the subconscious. Such ads did not lie, because they didn't make any explicit claims at all. They simply associated a physical commodity with non-physical aspirations. As in Pavlov's experiments with dogs, two completely different things—meat and a bell, domination and dress shoes—were associated in the subconscious. And just as Pavlov could have used a whistle instead of a bell, sex could as easily be associated with cars or shampoo or soda as with shoes. The actual material objects began to matter less than the fantasy world associated with them.

As consumerism became aspirational, the brand came to take on more importance than material objects. Beginning in the 1940s, corporations began exploring what brands mean to culture and to people's lives. Brands increasingly became ways of marking one's identity. Corporate marketers like Bruce Barton began to encourage businesses to discover their "souls." More and more, corporations used theological language to describe themselves. As one corporate manager put it, "Corporate branding is really about worldwide beliefs management."

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the actual product could vanish entirely. A recent Nike ad shows nothing but the swoosh and the words "Write the Future." Today the leading corporations are more concerned with manufacturing brands than with manufacturing products. Products are made in a factory; brands are made in the mind. According to Naomi Klein, the key moment came in 1988, when Philip Morris bought not Kraft the company, but Kraft the *brand* for $12.6 billion dollars. In *No Logo* (1999) Klein writes: "In the new market…the product always takes a back seat to the real product, the brand, and the selling of the brand acquired an extra component that can only be described as spiritual. Branding, in its truest and most advanced incarnations, is about corporate transcendence." Empirical research supports Klein's claim. In a series of studies published as "Brands: The Opiate of the Nonreligious Masses?" in the journal *Marketing Science*, researchers from the United States and Israel found that subjects with strong traditional religious ties were much less likely to choose name brands for products that are used as a form of self-expression. The authors conclude that brand loyalty functions as a substitute for traditional religion.

**The idea in Weber and Marx that inanimate objects come alive by taking life from us is found first in the Bible. Psalm 115 says "their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see.... Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them."**

Commodity fetishism is not simply an obsession with things. It is not materialism, but rather a kind of dematerialization. When use takes a back seat to exchange, commodities become vehicles for a flight into transcendence.

These themes can all be found in the biblical critique of idolatry. We tend to shy away from critiques of idolatry because they seem intolerant: "You don't worship like we do, so you're an idolater." And yet the concept of idolatry seems to capture something important about the contemporary scene. Even though Pope Francis is renowned for his optimism and love for all, he makes frequent recourse to the language of idolatry. In his first encyclical, *Lumen fidei*, he states that the opposite of faith is not a simple lack of belief but idolatry. When one stops believing in God, one does not simply stop believing; rather one believes in all sorts of things. Francis describes this as "an aimless passing from one lord to another.... Those who choose not to put their trust in God must hear the din of countless idols crying out: 'Put your trust in me!'" Francis has repeatedly used the language of idolatry when describing the contemporary economic system. In *Evangelii gaudium* he writes, "We have created new idols. The worship of the ancient golden calf (cf. Exodus 32:1–35) has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose."

Idolatry as Francis uses the term here does not refer to the explicit worship of gods with proper names. Although the Bible often does use the term in this way—in its description of sacrifices to the god Baal, for example—the Bible treats idolatry principally as a matter of behavior, not belief. Idolatry is considered not primarily a metaphysical error, but a betrayal of loyalty to the God of Israel. For this reason, the primary biblical images for idolatry are adultery and political disloyalty. The image of adultery is exemplified by the story of Hosea, who is told to marry a prostitute to symbolize the dalliances of Israel with other gods. The political image is exemplified by 1 Samuel 8, when the Israelites ask for a king to reign over them. God says to Samuel, "It is not you they have rejected but me, not wishing me to reign over them anymore. They are now doing to you exactly what they have done to me since the day I brought them out of Egypt until now, deserting me and serving other gods" (1 Samuel 8:7–8). Although the king is not explicitly worshiped as a god, the Israelites have trusted the king rather than God to protect them, and this is idolatry.

Note, though, that God does allow Israel to have kings as long as they don't replace him. Idolatry in a general sense is when people give an *inordinate* amount of trust or loyalty to something other than to God. Isaiah, for example, accuses the Israelites of idolatry for putting trust in an alliance with the Egyptian army. "Woe to those going down to Egypt for help, who put their trust in horses, who rely on the quantity of chariots, and on great strength of cavalrymen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel" (Isaiah 31:1). Isaiah links this turning away from God with the idolatrous reliance on what is created rather than on the Creator: "The Egyptian is human, not divine, his horses are flesh, not spirit" (Isaiah 31:3). In the biblical view, any created thing can be an object of idolatry. So Paul criticizes those whose "gods are their bellies…[and] their minds are set on earthly things" (Philippians 3:19), and warns against "greed, which is the same thing as worshipping a false god" (Colossians 3:5).

Weber's and Marx's idea that we become dominated by our own creations is embedded in the biblical critique of idolatry. In 1 Samuel 8, when the people ask for a king to replace God, Samuel warns them that the king will take their sons for his armies and their daughters as servants, will confiscate their land and harvest and animals for his own benefit, and finally, "you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day" (1 Samuel 8:17–18). So Jesus is drawing on a long tradition of idolatry as domination when he warns, "You cannot serve both God and Mammon" (Matthew 6:24). The Greek scripture leaves the Aramaic term "Mammon" untranslated here to personify money as a god, one that demands service. The idea in Weber and Marx that inanimate objects come alive by taking life from us is also found first in the Bible. Psalm 115 says "their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see…. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them."

The biblical concern with idolatry implies that humans are spontaneously worshiping creatures. In Exodus, the Israelites could stand only a little less than six weeks of Moses's absence before they demanded new gods to worship: "When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, 'Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us'" (Exodus 32:1). The story of the Golden Calf is a story not only of the human capacity for self-deception, but also of the inherent human need to worship. This recognition allows for a sympathetic account of idolatry. When Paul is in Athens, the Book of Acts reports that he is "distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (17:16). But he also recognizes the Athenians' idolatry as evidence that they are searching for meaning and ultimately for the true God.

Weber explains the basic human need to worship in terms of the need for meaning, a need that leads us inevitably to make gods. He is pessimistic that this need can be overcome. Marx, on the other hand, is convinced that people will cease making gods after the revolution. Once workers control the means of production, labor will cease to be alienated from its own products. But the revolution came and made a new god of the Communist state, to which tens of millions of lives were sacrificed. Unlike Weber and Marx, the Bible insists there is a real God, different from all our manufactured gods. We don't need to create gods because there is a God who created us, a God who loves us and wants us to build a kingdom of peace and justice here on earth.

In his famous Kenyon College commencement address in 2005, the novelist David Foster Wallace told the graduates, "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship." He goes on to say that the reason you might want to worship a real God "is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive." Worship money, and you'll never have enough. Worship your body, and you'll always feel ugly. Worship power, and you'll always be afraid. And so on.

As Weber and Marx and the Bible intuit, however, avoiding idolatry is not as simple as making a personal choice to change one's attitude about worship. Idolatry is embedded in whole economic and social and political systems that hold us in thrall. In an unjust system, we are all idolaters, and there needs to be systemic change to free people from false worship. If there is no true God, that task seems impossible. But as Jesus tells the disciples, "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

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# Controlling the Narrative

**Michael Hollerich**

*How the historical-critical method changed the study of early Christianity—for better and for worse*

**THE FATHERS REFOUNDED**
Protestant Liberalism, Roman Catholic Modernism, and the Teaching of Ancient Christianity in Early Twentieth-Century America

Elizabeth A. Clark
University of Pennsylvania Press,
$79.95, 448 pp.

"Controlling the narrative" has been a political watchword for a while now, as we are seeing again in the age of the permanent election. It's been a watchword for writing and understanding church history for a lot longer than that, going all the way back to Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339), early Christian biblical scholar, apologist, panegyrist and biographer of Constantine, and author of the first book to bear the title *Ecclesiastical History.* In that work, Eusebius created a triumphalist narrative of the victory of an original and unchanging orthodox Christianity passed on through the bishops as the successors of the apostles. It dominated Christian historical self-understanding for almost a millennium and a half, though the Western Christian version had to expand the narrative to make room for the papacy. The dictum that the winners write history was never truer than for Eusebius and his book.

Modern historiography has dismantled that narrative for compelling reasons. Postmodern suspicion of any and all grand narratives has discouraged the rise of a successor. No scholar of the last two generations has done more to ensure that Eusebius's chair remains vacant than Elizabeth Clark, Professor Emerita of the John Carlisle Kilgo Professorship of Religion at Duke University. Her books, articles, teaching, and professional leadership have deepened and diversified our understanding of what we mean by "early Christianity" and how we should study it.

With the publication of *The Fathers Refounded*, she has now completed an impressive two-part reconstruction of how the scholarly study of post-biblical early Christianity first took root in the United States. The first part of this reconstruction, *Founding the Fathers: Early Church History and Protestant Professors in Nineteenth-Century America*, appeared in 2011. These books are not fly-over intellectual history but trench-work of a gratifyingly old-fashioned archival kind. Clark must have exulted to find such ample documentary material after a career studying late antique Christianity, whose extant literature is discouragingly limited and whose hermeneutical opacity she has done so much to render transparent, as in her 2004 book *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn*.

*Founding the Fathers* focused on four Protestant seminaries: Harvard Divinity School, Yale Divinity School, Princeton Theological Seminary, and Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan, across Broadway from Columbia University. This sequel narrows the list to three—Union, Harvard, and the upstart University of Chicago Divinity School—and to just three scholars at those institutions: Union's Arthur Cushman McGiffert Sr. (1861–1933), Harvard's George La Piana (1879–1971), and the University of Chicago's Shirley Jackson Case (1872–1947). They are not of the same generation nor of the same nationality nor even of the same Protestant faith: Case was Canadian, and La Piana stands out as both an Italian national and a cradle Catholic, born near Palermo in Sicily.

George La Piana

Clark's purpose is to recover the fitful process by which the study of early Christianity was gradually freed from its confessional and apologetic origins in Protestant seminaries, as a consequence of the adoption of the methods of critical-historical scholarship as they were understood in the generation that came of age before World War I. For her, this is essentially a story of emancipation from intellectual controls that continue to influence "obscurantist and reactionary currents in American religious life." But *The Fathers Refounded* doesn't make heroes of its subjects. Clark records their mistakes and limitations, such as their underestimation of the enduring Jewish influence on early Christianity, with a wry detachment that effortlessly wins the reader's confidence.

The book's structure is straightforward. Its first chapter sets the intellectual context of early twentieth-century religious liberalism. Notable here is a primer on Catholic Modernism, in which for the first time Clark brings Roman Catholicism's unhappy engagement with modern thought into her narrative. This is followed by what amount to three separate monographs, each composed of three chapters: a first chapter on life and writings, a second on "assumptions, influences, and approaches," and a third on how a given professor went about the actual teaching of early Christianity. For each of these, Clark has done extensive archival work, as the endnotes demonstrate. The whole constitutes a richly instructive exercise in historiographical retrieval and reflection.

McGiffert, at Union Theological Seminary, gets the most extensive treatment: partly because there is much more usable documentation on him and his teaching, but also because he was the pioneer in bringing German historical standards to American scholarship on early Christianity. (Another merit of Clark's book is her excursion into the German theological and historical scene that had such an impact on American Protestantism.) She had already introduced McGiffert in *Founding the Fathers* as the brilliant protégé of Union's Philip Schaff, the true godfather of church history in America. Schaff, himself a German immigrant, helped support the young McGiffert during three years in Germany (1885–1888), where he worked extensively with Adolf von Harnack at Berlin and Marburg. Besides getting his doctoral degree at Marburg, McGiffert also embarked, at Schaff's urging, on a new translation and commentary of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, the book that made his career. Eventually McGiffert succeeded Schaff at Union and spent the rest of his career there, enjoying a nearly unbroken chain of triumphs as a beloved scholar, teacher, and administrator, if you except his turn-of-the-century tiff with Presbyterian church authorities over heresy charges occasioned by his 1897 book *A History of Christianity in the Apostolic Age*.

McGiffert drank German theological liberalism pure and at the source, as a student of Harnack and devotee of the theological legacy of Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889), both of whom thought that early Christianity had erred in allying itself with Greek philosophy. Ritschl believed historical study could restore to us Jesus' actual message in a form moderns could find meaningful. Once ensconced again in New York, McGiffert cultivated the company of American pragmatists, above all John Dewey, his contemporary at Columbia. German idealism and American pragmatism: a double-barreled anti-metaphysical shotgun blast that left traditional Christian dogmatics in tatters. This troubled McGiffert not at all, because he thought that modern Christianity had to jettison outdated packaging that obscured what truly mattered: the social and practical implications of the Christian message. McGiffert's charm and genuine learning earned him exceptional respect, though Clark rightly points out how resistant he was to the great shift that was already occurring in European scholarship's rediscovery of the importance of apocalyptic eschatology in the gospels and primitive Christianity.

George (born Giorgio) La Piana wins his place in *The Fathers Refounded* not just for his role in fostering the historical study of early Christianity at Harvard, but even more for his standing as a Catholic Modernist—a Catholic analogue to liberal Protestants. La Piana was one of numerous educated priests of his generation who were forced into silence, evasion, or resignation by the Vatican's suppression of Modernism. Ordained a priest in Palermo in 1900 and eventually given a teaching position in church history, he chafed under the challenge of using historical methods in an intellectual climate dominated by the neo-scholastic revival. The anti-Modernist condemnations of 1907 made his position increasingly difficult—so, it seems, did the constraints imposed by celibacy. In 1913 he resigned rather than take the anti-Modernist oath and followed four siblings to America. He was saved after two years of floundering in Milwaukee by a fortuitous appointment to a teaching fellowship at Harvard Divinity School in 1915. He was the first Catholic hired there. By

1926 he had parlayed his important publications on Rome in the first centuries into a full professorship and eventually a joint appointment in the history department, where he taught Italian history. His portfolio in the Divinity School also included Byzantine history, testimony to his exceptional range. He retired in 1947 and lived another twenty-four years, dying in 1971 after an ambiguous deathbed reconciliation with the Catholic Church under circumstances that Clark calls "rather disturbing."

Clark's task wasn't made easier by the chaotic condition in which La Piana left his papers. He didn't do much research on early Christianity after his early publications, devoting himself instead to passionate opposition to Mussolini's Fascist dictatorship and to the Vatican's cooperation with it beginning with the 1929 Lateran Accords. His primary scholarly project after 1929 consisted of years of research into the history of papal concordats, which never produced an actual book. Clark shows how La Piana never lapsed from an approach to church history that was resolutely historical and anti-theological. Despite his hostility to hierarchical abuses of power, however, he showed in his writings and lectures a sympathetic understanding of the inevitable compromises and adaptations made by enterprising churchmen to keep the Christian movement from disintegration. Clark identifies the concept of "the associated life" as the leitmotif of La Piana's thought, which he saw as fundamental to Christianity and which he owed to another Italian Modernist, Ernesto Buonaiuti. La Piana regarded Christianity's successful organization under the monarchical episcopacy as the chief explanation for its survival and eventual victory.

Shirley Jackson Case seems the least interesting of the three scholars Clark profiles. Is that because so much of what he advocated has become standard practice? The scholar whom we meet in Clark's book doesn't have the same personal or intellectual flair as McGiffert and La Piana, though his career trajectory is the one most familiar to professional scholars today. Or did Clark just have less to work with? She notes that there is less available archival material to document Case's teaching at Chicago, where he did not seem able or willing to go much beyond the first three centuries. (Did that become a Chicago tradition? His later successor Robert M. Grant, my dissertation director, was trained in Christian origins at Harvard and rarely ventured beyond Constantine.) And Case's primary scholarship lagged as he got pulled into administration and editorial work, producing survey studies for a wider readership. His major impact seems to have been as an energetic and influential leader in the professionalization of both New Testament studies and church history in general. In his historical work, Case insisted on an empirically grounded social history attentive to the environmental forces to which Christianity responded. His writings abound with references to the importance for the historian of "function," "efficacy," "vital experiences," and the like, rather than to theology and the history of ideas. This puts him more in line with later historiographical developments, even if he overstated what we could know about "the actual personal experiences" of Christianity's devotees. His denial of a supra-historical Christian "essence" going back to Jesus is also closer to present-day assumptions.

A deeply serious and original book, *The Fathers Refounded* will be welcomed by other scholars of Christianity in late antiquity because of its genealogy of their specialization in the United States. (The origins of the study of early Christianity, whether it be characterized as "Patristics," "Ancient Church History," "Christianity in Late Antiquity," or what have you, are notably divided by nation, religious confession, and ancillary disciplinary field.)

But why should it interest a wider readership? Its intense focus on key transitional figures sheds valuable light on how mainstream American Christianity became intellectually respectable and modern. The era of Christian liberalism framed in *The Fathers Refounded* soon went into temporary eclipse during the three decades of war and depression that began with World War I. But the issues liberalism addressed did not go away and returned with postwar peace and prosperity (an instructive parallel story could be told about Dietrich Bonhoeffer's complicated dance with religious liberalism). This applies to Catholicism every bit as much as to Protestantism. The Modernist crisis repressed problems without solving them. Ditto for the little ice age of Pius XII's last decade, which only deferred the constructive efforts of the *nouvelle théologie* without providing an alternative. For that we had to wait for Vatican II.

One of those problems was the integration of historical consciousness into Catholic thinking—the reconciliation of claims to unchanging dogmatic truth with the facts of historical change, a challenge Bernard Lonergan tried to meet with his work on theological method. *Commonweal* readers may be more familiar with the books of the late John Noonan, who wrote so brilliantly on changes in teaching on usury, contraception, religious freedom, and slavery. I just learned that Noonan's M.A. thesis at Catholic University had been on Alfred Loisy, Rome's enemy no. 1 among the original Modernists. Lonergan was essentially a philosopher and Noonan a jurist. But both sought the coherence and intelligibility beneath change and development. (So did Loisy, at least initially: he rebutted Harnack's primitivism by arguing that maturity was necessary to judge meaning in development.)

Lonergan and Noonan's concern for continuity across time separates them, it seems, from the rather ruthless stress of Clark's subjects on the gap that separated ancient past from modern present, so important was it to them to bring Christianity into harmony with the dominant values of their own time. That meant telling a story about Christian origins and development that met expectations and standards of "scientific" history, standards that they regarded as self-evident. Case may have favored social history, La Piana institutional history, and McGiffert the history of ideas. But they

all embraced the same methodological canons of historicism (interpretation in historical context), naturalism (rejection of supernatural causation), and relativism (bracketing providentialist assumptions about Christian distinctiveness and superiority), though the last of those rather inconsistently. They were certainly right to do so. Postmodern thinkers like Foucault, Michel de Certeau, and others may have added further astringencies to chasten what we think we know about the past, but they did not repeal the critical standards established by their modernist predecessors.

Still, the triumph of criticism has not come cost-free, and the Catholic historian is obliged to consider the cost with a cold eye. The further the epistemological distance that historical method puts between us and the past, the more remote and alien the past may come to seem. The Frankfurt School and the sociology of knowledge have taught us how powerfully "knowledge and interest" are linked. The pursuit of a domain of knowledge depends on a social interest that justifies and subsidizes it. Take away the interest and the rationale for supporting it starts to erode. We see this happening now with the commodification of the contemporary university, which is putting tremendous pressure on the social prestige of the humanities and, a fortiori, of theology, which ultimately depends on communities of faith to justify its existence. The decline of organized religious traditions then undercuts the social relevance of studying the historical and textual origins of those traditions.

Arthur McGiffert in *The Broad Ax,* 1900

McGiffert, La Piana, and Case were largely immune to such pressures because they taught at liberal Protestant institutions that shared the cultural hegemony of the great universities with which they were affiliated. They also shared the same establishment donor classes, an identity most vividly demonstrated in Chicago's case, where the largesse of a single person, John D. Rockefeller, created both university and divinity school at one stroke, barely two decades before Case's appointment in 1908. But their cultural dominance was fated to weaken with the decline of the Protestant establishment that created them. Venerable Harvard Divinity School, founded in 1816 as a Unitarian seminary and the first school built outside the historic Yard of Harvard College, suffered a near-death experience in the 1950s when the super technocrat James Bryant Conant was president of Harvard—but it was spared the chopping block because his successor, Nathan Marsh Pusey (note the WASP names), was personally soft on religion.

Harvard and Chicago survived by diversifying their offerings, first by becoming ecumenical, then by presenting themselves as experts in "religion" *tout court*. Union's loose association with Columbia is qualitatively different from Harvard's and Chicago's relationships with their host institutions. It has retained more of its seminary mandate, and so its Christian heritage is more overt, though in exceedingly liberal form.

I spent much of the 1970s as a graduate student at Harvard and Chicago. At Harvard I took courses with church historian George Huntston Williams, who was La Piana's successor and confidant in his long retirement. At Chicago, several of my classes were in a seminar room dedicated to Case's memory. Both schools had strong faculty and programs in the history of Christianity—I think it was still called church history at Harvard. But it was clear even then that thinking of "the church," however one understood it, as the subject of a continuous, two-thousand-year history was academically unsustainable. Since then the fracturing has continued apace at the disciplinary, curricular, and faculty level.

I remain grateful for the extraordinary resources both institutions offered a young Catholic scholar who wanted to be a church historian. But I'm less sure today about why they exist. Clark's new book does not answer that question—not that she intended to. For her, the ongoing exploration of the religions of late antiquity, now ramifying to embrace the rise of Islam and the whole integrated world stretching from Britain to central Asia and from the Baltic to the Nile Valley and the Arabian peninsula, seems inherently worth doing. Similarly, her chosen subjects in *The Fathers Refounded* appear to have been more concerned with securing the academic freedom they needed for their work than with justifying the value of the work itself.

La Piana felt the sting of censure and rejection in a poignant way that neither McGiffert nor Case did. He left his native country in both a literal and a spiritual sense. Perhaps in retaliation for the way he had been treated by Rome, he served as proofreader and counselor to anti-Catholic controversialist Paul Blanshard when he wrote *American Freedom and Catholic Power* (1949), a professional service Clark does not mention. I regret my church's panicked expulsion of La Piana and others. His love of democracy and hatred of tyranny win my respect. And he was not immune to the appeal of mysticism, though that was more characteristic of his friend Buonaiuti. McGiffert's prospective vision of a social Christianity seems cold comfort for surrendering resurrection and Eucharist. Did Case even have a prospective vision? In any event, *The Fathers Refounded* can make the reader more aware of the legitimate necessity of historical method, but also of its risks and consequences.

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# Pilgrims

**Kathleen Hill**

A friend of ours celebrating her birthday in early June rented a house in the Loire Valley and invited her closest friends to visit for a couple of weeks. My husband C. and myself were very glad to be included. When the time came to leave Azay-sur-Cher, it was still only the end of June and we couldn't remember why we'd ever thought it necessary to return, so early in the summer, to New York City. For what? C. and I followed the academic calendar and at the moment had no responsibilities anywhere. We'd spent a fair amount of time in France but had never visited Languedoc so decided to take the train south to Toulouse. Most of all, we wanted to visit friends we'd known years before in the West African country of Niger at a time when we'd all been living there with our small children. Our combined offspring had families of their own by now, but we snatched at any chance to meet and talk not only of the Niger we'd known in the early '70s but of our long friendship. Now Vicki and Jean François were spending the summer in a village called Le Plan, south of Toulouse, on the old road to Santiago de Compostela.

From Tour, we took the train to Toulouse where Vicki and Jean François met us, then drove us to their house along roads lined on either side with plane trees, trunks raw and sun-speckled, green light winking overhead. The heat was intense. These were the foothills of the Pyrenees, Spain just on the other side of them.

Each time the four of us met I found it impossible to resist mentioning—if not recounting in full detail—the story of how we'd all become friends. C. and I, who'd been living in eastern Niger, were crossing the country in a bus with our three little daughters. We intended to buy a car in the capital, Niamey. Before we'd gone far, we'd stopped for the night in Maradi, where Vicki and Jean François lived and where we'd all met briefly. The following day, as we were sitting in the bus with the girls—waiting for the bus to fill so we could continue our trip over an unpaved road where the sand rose in clouds and floated in the window leaving grit between our teeth—Vicki had suddenly appeared outside the open window. She rapidly passed through it two baguettes and a sack containing a dozen hard-boiled eggs, as well as some toys that belonged to her own little girl. "You'll need them," she said.

Cloister of the cathedral Sainte-Marie in Saint-Bertrand-de-Comminges, France

PHOTONONSTOP / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

These were the gifts we hadn't known to ask for. Gifts that only later on I recalled as lit by a mysterious radiance.

NOW, AT LE PLAN—BETWEEN LENGTHY MEALS when Vicki and Jean François told stories of their recent years working in Yemen, and we all talked about our grown children, about people we'd known long ago in Niger—C. and I drove in our rented car to towns in the region that had been way stations for those making the pilgrimage to Compostela. In St. Gaudens we stepped into the cool spaces of the Romanesque church, admired the grace and buoyancy of its apse. We then continued on the road to St. Bertrand-de-Comminges and from a distance saw the cathedral high on a hill and just below it the large hostel where pilgrims fatigued by their travels had found food and shelter and companionship. It occurred to me that pilgrimage was not so much about arriving at a place, as discovering anew what one knows already, the accidental joys the pilgrim is suddenly alive to.

Le Plan had also been a stop on the pilgrims' road. All night long, the bells of the Église Saint-Pierre, the high-crenellated church that shadowed Vicki and Jean François's house, struck the hours and half-hours, greeted the Angelus at six in the morning with a high bright shower of sound. How strange, I thought one midnight as the clock struck twelve, that we fix a time, an hour, a half-hour, in order to say: take notice. Now.

And with that thought, a sudden imperative took hold. I remembered it was seven years to the day that my father had died and understood that at last I wanted to write about his death. I hadn't been present when my father died, I'd been crossing the ocean on my way home from elsewhere. I felt some grievous error had been committed but didn't know whether to blame myself for my late arrival or my father who'd taken his leave so abruptly. But recently I'd come to feel that every new journey ended up as yet another barely disguised return. I hoped that writing about my absence on the day he'd departed might ease my baffled grief.

The next day I wrote a first paragraph and stopped. Then a couple of days later, one hot mid-afternoon, listening to the clock strike two-thirty, I wrote all in a rush the last lines. I didn't have a middle, didn't have most of it. To do that, I imagined I would need something I didn't have. But what that was or where it would come from I had no idea.

WE HAD ALREADY STAYED WITH VICKI AND JEAN François nearly a week now, and thought it time to move on. We wondered if there was a monastery nearby and if we could possibly stay there. Vicki

said she knew of a Carmelite monastery in Muret, just outside Toulouse. It was the old monastery founded by one of Teresa of Ávila's nuns, rebuilt now in modern times. And then Vicki was on the phone making an appointment for us to meet the prioress the next day.

We met the smiling prioress—or *prieure* as she was called—in a little room divided by a grille. We sat on one side, she on the other. We asked if we might stay a little longer than their usual guests. Perhaps even a month? She could see no problem in that, she said. And we were a couple—would they be able to accommodate us? There was no problem there, either. All the guests were given their own room and we would be put in rooms next to each other where we could come and go as we pleased. The last question seemed the hardest. We used computers during the day, we said. Would that fit in with the life here? She didn't see why not. After all, a day in the monastery is an ordinary day like any other, anywhere, but one that tries to put prayer at its center. Besides, computers are silent.

So it was decided. After we'd returned our rented car Vicki drove us the half-hour back to the monastery through fields of sunflowers staring west to the sun, fields crossed by lines of Lombardy poplars, trembling leaves throwing off the light. Again we said goodbye to Vicki. Until the next time.

WE ARRIVED ABOUT SIX-THIRTY, AND WERE quickly ushered into a small dining room where the other guests were sitting round a table already eating their evening meal laid out on a yellow tablecloth. I was seated at an empty place facing a large open window that took up one side of the room, shutters thrown back on a garden. The sun streamed in at a golden slant and touched the deep rose hydrangeas at the window ledge, the white laurel blossoms just behind. An orange trumpet vine on a nearby brick wall was all lit up as on the day of revelation. It didn't seem possible we'd been delivered to such a place. An elderly man who introduced himself as Père René Bel sat at one end of the table, and round it two others who like ourselves were guests of the monastery. Now entirely dependent on our rusty French, we explained ourselves as best we could. But no one seemed to mind and soon the meal was over and we were included in washing the dishes. Before they were dried and put away Père Bel had disappeared to his nearby apartment and returned carrying a nest of wires over his arm to hook us up to the internet. He was sure that would be important to us.

**Père Bel had disappeared to his nearby apartment and returned carrying a nest of wires over his arm to hook us up to the internet. He was sure that would be important to us.**

Then we were shown to our rooms. The wall opposite the door of mine was mostly taken up by an enormous window that stood open in the twilight. I didn't know then that I would spend hours lying on the bed that faced the window watching the long needled pine branches lifting up and down. The scent of pine grew more intense as night fell. As did the sharp smell of lavender that rose from the garden below. I left the shutters open all night so as to breathe in the air.

C. AND I WERE RAPIDLY INCLUDED IN THE little band that sat round the table in the *réfectoire*: for a casual breakfast from seven on, a midday dinner just after twelve. And then supper at six. These included Père Bel, the chaplain of the nuns in the monastery, as well as a friend of his, François, a Congolese priest. He and Père, as we'd begun to call him, had known each other in Rome years before and had stayed in touch. Now François was a parish priest in Northern Italy, from where he'd traveled to visit his old friend. There was also a young woman, Chantal, from Pau, who was taking art classes in Toulouse during this week and staying at the monastery.

During dinner the following evening, Père Bel suggested that afterwards the five of us go to visit a friend of his, the wife of a farmer, several kilometers away. He had a car, and so did Chantal, so we could easily follow one another. We had already learned that Père was a Sulpicien, which meant that he belonged to an order that formed people for the priesthood, and that he'd spent many years working in Togo. He was eighty-three now and retired.

On the way, Chantal and I exclaimed over the fields of sunflowers, the old barns, the lonely farms. We went higher and higher and then we were winding up a steep hill and at the very top reached a house, just above a field of cows. Père's friend Monique came out of the house and after Père had greeted her with the same radiant smile with which he'd greeted us, he introduced us all to each other. Monique immediately told us she was very isolated up here, their only neighbors had died, there was no one. Beneath a tree she'd prepared a table with cold drinks, she'd set chairs in the grass all round. After she'd taken care of us, she leaned forward and began to talk. I said to Chantal later on, driving down the hill, that it was as if we'd been watching a Bergman film in which a lovely woman talks freely about her life. Everything about Monique was striking, her bright eyes, very blue, her full lips, her dazzling white blouse, bare arms. She spoke of her three daughters, of the middle one, of the school, the

problems. They were eleven years old and nine and seven. They were all away, she was without them for the first time since they were born. But no, she didn't worry, she confessed, she knew they were all right. She asked Chantal about her drawing, where did she go for inspiration. Perhaps she herself might try something similar. Did we think this might happen? François was sitting there at ease, beaming, and later said we'd experienced "la France profonde." Meanwhile Père sat silent, a little apart, white hair combed neatly above his forehead.

Monique's husband went by on a tractor and soon after came to join us. An enormous man in overalls, burnt brick red by the sun. Chantal spoke with him and said later that he was bitter that the government didn't support farmers, that he had to work like a beast to keep up the farm he'd inherited from his mother.

The next night, again at Père's suggestion, we all made an excursion to visit a lonely Romanesque church in what seemed to be a meadow. Having visited several of these Romanesque churches, we talked about how as you stand inside, adjusting to the darkness, something slowly begins to emerge, the central window behind the altar streaming light, the faded frescoes appearing like ghostly forms moving into clarity.

Chantal and François made their departures a few days later and it was then that Père and C. and I entered into the days of our intimacy.

**WE TALKED ABOUT WEST AFRICA, OF COURSE,** Père in his customary place at the head of the table, three times a day, one of us on either side of him. Père had been six years in Burkina Faso, another six in Benin, several in Togo, five in Rome, three in Paris at St. Sulpice, a year in Limoges, a year in Miami. He showed us magazine articles he'd written about his time in Africa, told us his most precious memories were bound up with his years there. We all agreed Africa had been the great gift of our lives. He had grown up not far from where we were now, in Languedoc, in a poor family, had been a seaman during the Second World War, had decided to become a priest as a result of what he'd seen during that terrible time. Sitting at the table, he lifted his arms to indicate the inexpressible. Lowered them. A gesture of surrender. He wanted to know all about us. Yes, he'd learned English during his year in Miami, but we insisted he help us with our French. He proved an exacting teacher, interrupting me in the middle of an impassioned sentence to say the adverb belonged before the adjective, not after. He wanted to know about our children, each one, their names, their inclinations. He listened eagerly to stories, throwing back his head to laugh heartily. He himself was the youngest of four boys: "*Ça explique beaucoup*," he said. Did we have sisters? Brothers? And our parents, what of them? We talked about the current state of the church. I told him I thought it a scandal that women were still barred from ordination. I grew heated as I spoke. He listened, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

**He had decided to become a priest as a result of what he'd seen during that terrible time. Sitting at the table, he lifted his arms to indicate the inexpressible. Lowered them. A gesture of surrender.**

A new visitor arrived, a man in his early fifties, who moved easily between French, English, and Italian. His wife, whose sister was a Carmelite nun here, had died of cancer three years earlier and her ashes were buried at the monastery. He made a pilgrimage twice a year, he said, to visit the place. And to see his friend, Père Bel. He'd been a member of the *commedia dell'arte*, sang Don Giovanni at full volume while washing the dishes. Père stood nearby drying them, smiling to himself.

**PÈRE SAID MASS EVERY MORNING AT ELEVEN.** It was immediately after that we repaired to the *réfectoire* for our midday meal. On one side of the chapel was a wooden statue of a Carmelite saint: St. Teresa, founder of the discalced order, caught with a plume in her hand in the very act of writing her autobiography, perhaps, or one of her books concerning prayer. On the other side stood Teresa's great friend, St. John of the Cross, holding open a volume that surely contained his poem, *The Spiritual Canticle*. I learned the Carmelites had been founded on Mt. Carmel outside of Haifa and their patron saint is the prophet Elijah—or Saint Elie, as they call him in France. The one who listened for the voice of God in the storm and in the earthquake and in the fire. And at last heard it in the still small voice. Covered his face with his cloak as God passed by.

The Carmelites not only sing the psalms in community several times a day but also pray in their own cells in solitude. They also silently pray in the company of each other. In the afternoons I sometimes came into the chapel to sit as quietly as I could while behind the grille the nuns knelt or sat in profound silence. Were they listening for the voice of God? Did they, like Elijah, hear it while I heard nothing?

I remembered those fellow travellers crossing Niger long ago who—while we remained on the bus eating Vicki's hard-boiled eggs—had gotten off and knelt on their goat skins in wide open spaces of wind and stinging sand, bowing in unison. It had been about three in the afternoon, at the third call to prayer. As we tore the baguette

into chunks, we'd looked out the window at our companions standing in the immense open landscape: kneeling, bowing, touching their foreheads to the sand. Were they also sustaining the world we all passed through?

I, who knew so little how to pray, sat humbled, remembering the psalmist's words: *Open my lips that I might sing your praise*. A prayer for stuck writers, surely.

We met the *prieure* again, the grille between. She said that the impulse within the community was to react, *reagir*. But the hope, she continued, is to come into oneself, into one's fullest self, which I supposed would be precisely a state in which one did not react. Perhaps responded instead. One returns, she said, *chaque jour* to the same task of loving others. The task is taken up day after day, in the monastery, elsewhere. St. Teresa, she added, had thought that the love of God was discovered through other people, in friendship.

ONE EVENING WE WERE TALKING ABOUT FILMS at dinner and C. mentioned one we'd seen recently: *Of Gods and Men*. Had Père seen it, he asked? "*Mais bien sur!*" Père exclaimed. Indeed, he had a DVD of the film in his apartment, in the original French, *Des hommes et des dieux*, and he immediately invited us to accompany him back after dinner to watch it. Opening the door of his little apartment he bent to pick up his neglected copy of *Le Monde* delivered that day. Then the three of us sat down in front of his upstanding computer screen and after he'd slipped in the DVD we watched the film, spellbound. When it was over we sat without moving until Père breathed into the long silence a single word: yes.

Standing on his threshold, we said *Merci encore, dors bien, à demain*. The last of the summer's daylight was fading in the west and the bell was ringing to announce the Grand Silence. There would be no talking now in the monastery until tomorrow.

But the next morning when we assembled at the usual breakfast of baguette and coffee we found that the film had broken open whatever was waiting and we talked of it throughout the day. At bottom the film seemed to be about the fear of death and what's possible in the light of that fear. A couple of nights later Père invited us to watch Carl Dreyer's *Passion of St. Joan*. And there again the fear of death. But in each case—the Trappist monks in Algeria, Jeanne herself, *la Pucelle*—the fear had been accepted and at last faded in the light of a larger understanding.

But something was happening I had no words for and that even in this aftertime I think requires another language altogether. That first evening, dazzled though I was by the sun on the rose hydrangeas resting in the window frame, I'd immediately recognized my own father in Père: his delicate hands, a kind of shrewd attention he gave to each of the people around him. I watched him watching each of us in turn, could see he did not judge easily, was bemused, rather. He was a tolerant man. My hasty temper that had shamed me my entire life I felt he recognized and forgave, just as my father had. And gradually I began to love him deeply because I fancied he loved me, accepted me as I was. And with that love was born a dread of the last day. Although we had almost two weeks remaining in Muret, it seemed that Père was already being taken from us. Or we from him. In no time at all we'd be on a train streaming north to Paris. If I hadn't been conscious of my father's death in the moment that it was happening, then I would be conscious now. But had my father returned only to be snatched away again?

**Something was happening I had no words for and that even in this aftertime I think requires another language altogether.**

WE HAD BEGUN GOING EVERY NIGHT AFTER dinner to Père's apartment to watch another film from his large collection. Sometimes he chose it, sometimes one of us did. But they all seemed to be about the same thing. Together we watched *Cinema Paradiso*, *Babette's Feast*, *Schindler's List*, *The Seventh Seal*. If Père was moved by something, he lifted both his arms, lowered them. Or sometimes lifted only one arm, as if he were about to conduct an orchestra. Or, in the long silence at the end, pronounced the word "yes." Each night we stood at the doorway as we left, repeating the same words: *Merci encore, dors bien, à demain*. The poplars were swallowed by darkness a little earlier now. Our summer's day withered away. Too soon. Too soon. Each of these goodbyes at the doorway was a striking of the clock, a reminder that the days were being counted off, one at a time. The piece I was writing was coming to me easily now, I scarcely knew what I was writing. And then it was finished.

One afternoon, looking out from my window, I saw Père sitting on a bench, an old man in the sun surrounded by moving trees and shadows. When we left the monastery we would be abandoning him to dark November evenings when he would enter the *réfectoire* and eat his dinner alone, to rain-lashed days in December when he could no longer sit outside in the sun. I said to myself that there would be no one to bring him more coffee in the morning, no one at dinner to jump up to offer him more salad, more fish.

I could so clearly see his back, slightly stooped, receding down the corridor as he returned to his apartment. Yet he had been fine before we arrived, he wasn't alone. What could it be that made this separation seem unbearable?

On the last night of all we watched *Forbidden Games: Jeux interdits*. It is Paris, 1940, and the Germans are entering the city. A little girl about five years old is leaving with her parents in a car, the car stalls, they continue on foot. Crouching on a bridge both parents are killed in an air attack while Paulette holds on to her injured dog, carries him into a field where she encounters a boy, Michel, about ten. Now she is carrying the dead dog, weeping; she is going to stay with Michel's family who are very poor. Paulette becomes intensely attached to Michel who knows his prayers and says them over the little dog she's trying to bury. Together they make a cemetery, make graves for a mole, a cockroach, a chick, a robin. They are dearest friends. The Red Cross comes to collect Paulette, she's taken away, is sitting in some way station in Paris. She hears someone call "Michel," herself calls out, "Michel, *Maman*." Now she is running wildly into the crowd screaming: Michel! Michel! *Le fin*.

By this time I felt I was present at my own undoing. Was it the loss of Père I feared? Or was it my own death? Or were they the same, was the loss itself a death. I remembered how when I was thirteen I'd gone with my father to the movies to see *Roman Holiday* and how the parting at the end had seemed to me then beyond what anyone could endure. "I have to leave you now": words that spell the end. And yet facing it together, the lovers had triumphed. It was what I had not done with my father, I had not been there when he died. And certainly I would not be there when Père died either. I thought how love is always the same: the fear of losing it surpasses everything else.

Had I known before that the greatest gift of the road was the love of another human being? Of course I had. But I had not fully understood that in each love we seek the ghostly image of another. I saw now that the task of love, as the *prieure* had put it, includes making space inside oneself for one fatal parting after another, each one calling up all the rest. If a pilgrimage means anything, it means that although the road may be long, any one of us is given only a short time to follow it. And despite the rapture of love, our keenest joy, we reach our end in solitude. A fatal parting can happen at any time. And does. If a parting feels like a death that's because it is.

**I saw now that the task of love, as the *prieure* had put it, includes making space inside oneself for one fatal parting after another, each one calling up all the rest.**

AS IT HAPPENED, THERE WOULD BE NO AFTERmath, although we pretended there might be. In the last days at Muret we often talked to Père of his coming to visit us in New York, the wonderful visit we'd have. C. said he'd meet him at the airport and bring him directly back to our apartment. We spoke of our return. We remembered all this only afterwards. Then, less than a week before we were to leave, Père had an appointment with his doctor and was laconic when we asked him how it had gone. "*Tu sai*s," he replied when we asked. "*A mon age*." And then: "*Je suis pret*."

It was only in the first days of fall, a month or so after our departure, that we learned through Chantal and *prieure* that Père was dying. Early in the new year he was gone. In retrospect we wondered if it was at the appointment we remembered that he'd learned he had pancreatic cancer.

But by then, for me, the drama of departure was over and I took comfort in the thought that we'd shared his final summer and that it had been a radiantly happy one. Père had a gift for friendship and we had become friends at the very end. Perhaps we were like the assassin that the Trappist monk of *Des hommes et des dieux* addresses in his final letter as "friend of the last minute." What I hadn't seen was that his destination was in plain view and would be reached before my own, just as my father's had been. It wasn't we who were leaving, it was he who was making a departure. Nor had I understood that the grief I'd felt for what I thought of as my abandonment of him had everything to do with the fact that I, not he, must travel on alone. That my own destination waited for me at some point still unknown.

On our last afternoon at the monastery I walked outside in the meadow that reached to the gate. It was a bright cloudless day in early August and the grass was high and very green. Stepping carefully, I tried to avoid crushing the pink clover, Queen Anne's lace, thistle, and little butter-and-eggs flowers, bright yellow. I heard the poplar leaves rustling behind me and looking back saw the pine tree, at four-thirty in the afternoon, half sunlit, the deep blue sky beyond. The lower half rested in shadow. The time had come to leave. The gifts of the day had overflowed the banks of the road and flowed off into the meadows where the poplars were standing.

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RITA FERRONE

# Papal Fiction

'The Two Popes'

"The most glorious journey can begin with a mistake." This is the observation made by Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio in the opening scene of Fernando Meirelles's *The Two Popes*, as he preaches to throngs of poor people in a Buenos Aires slum. It signals the central themes of the film: change, reconciliation, and hope for the future. The scene, shot on location in Argentina, surges with the energy of the people and the place. A kaleidoscope of color and activity soon settles into a moment of stillness and focused attention as Bergoglio speaks. He stands in the midst of all these people: not above them, but with them. And they are listening.

But what is the mistake? The first possible answer the film offers is that Bergoglio (played by Jonathan Pryce) has decided to resign from his position at the head of the church of Buenos Aires. He is tired and weary from the direction that the church is taking, and he wants out. As his repeated letters to Pope Benedict XVI go unanswered, he plans a trip to Rome to press the pope in person to let him retire.

Little does he know that, at the same time, Pope Benedict is contemplating his own resignation. What holds Benedict back from retirement, however, is his fear that Bergoglio might succeed him. In the 2005 conclave at which Benedict was elected, Bergoglio was a serious contender. The public forgot this fact during the conclave of 2013; many presumed that Bergoglio came out of nowhere. But the prospect of Bergoglio's rise was not lost on Benedict. He kept an eye (and a file) on him. And he didn't like what he saw: too much willingness to bend the rules and too little respect for tradition. Benedict comes to regard Bergoglio as his nemesis, someone with whom he disagrees so fundamentally that he fears what might happen to the church should the Argentine ascend to the Chair of Peter. Benedict (played by a fine Anthony Hopkins) decides to face his fears. Just as Bergoglio prepares to head to Rome, Benedict summons him for a face-to-face meeting—for his own purposes. "He must have gotten my letter after all," Bergoglio mutters, not realizing there's another agenda at play.

This is the stuff of comedy. And indeed *The Two Popes* is full of humorous bits, arising from the clash of opposites, thwarted expectations, and unexpected convergences. (One laugh-out-loud moment: the soundtrack accompanying the solemn entrance of the cardinals into the Sistine Chapel for the 2005 conclave suddenly blares strains of Abba's "Dancing Queen." A hat tip to Frédéric Martel?) Yet it is also a serious affair. The meeting between Benedict and Bergoglio becomes a three-day conversation over which the central drama of the film unfolds.

The first encounter between the two men takes place in a perfectly manicured garden at the pope's summer residence—a sharp contrast with the rollicking streets of Argentina we've just seen. And of course this is a setup. All the clichés concerning the differences between the two popes come tumbling out. Benedict lives in regal isolation. He is stern, even censorious. He is concerned about protecting Tradition and Truth with a capital "T." In a reminder that the indignities of old age are upon him, Benedict receives commands from his watch to "Keep moving" every time he pauses in his walk. Yet he's clearly a tough old bird, and his strong will is on full display. Hopkins's elderly pope knows that change is on the horizon, but he resists it with every fiber of his being.

Pryce's Bergoglio is the perfect foil for all this. With wit and winsomeness, and aided by an uncanny resemblance to Francis, Pryce quickly helps establish the contrast between his character and Benedict. Bergoglio eschews luxury and lives simply. A true son of Argentina, he's passionate about soccer and dances the tango. He enjoys his food. Most of all, he enjoys being with people. (At one point, Benedict arrives on the scene and is startled to find that Bergoglio has made friends with the gardener; together they are extolling the merits of oregano.) Throughout, and just as you would expect, Bergoglio wears clunky black shoes and carries his famous, scuffed black briefcase. The briefcase holds his resignation letter, which he will push under the nose of Benedict at every opportunity—a bit of stage business that grows more hilarious each time it is repeated (and it is repeated often). His dogged persistence in carrying out his mission is an indicator of his own strength of will. He does not bend easily.

As their encounter progresses, Benedict proceeds to challenge Bergoglio on his record, while Bergoglio puts up a lively defense of his decisions and priorities. The discussion that follows is a quick run-through of matters of philosophical principle on which the two popes are reputed to disagree, or at least to have distinctly different practical approaches. But this is treated simplistically. At no point does *The Two Popes* become a film of ideas; there is no attempt to chart the nuances of their viewpoints. Meirelles hews firmly to the time-tested formula of setting two opposing personalities against each other.

Yet as they spend more time together,

their exchanges become more personal in nature, more intimate, and more human. We learn through flashbacks about how the young Bergoglio decided to become a Jesuit priest. At a point of decision in his life, a chance conversation with a thoughtful priest whom he had never seen before and who, as it happens, was dying of leukemia, tips the balance. Is the unexpected conversation with a kind stranger perhaps the mistake that opens onto a glorious journey?

But the journey is not so glorious. Through flashbacks, we learn about the young Bergoglio (played by the accomplished Argentinian actor Juan Minujín). There are wrenching scenes concerning events that occurred during the dictatorship. Bergoglio was indeed mentored by a communist, a woman at a food chemistry lab whom he deeply respected. Her daughter was abducted by the regime, and she herself was later arrested and killed. We see the mistakes Bergoglio makes after being appointed provincial of his order at an early age. The film depicts the true story of how he ordered two Jesuits out of their frontline ministry among the poor during the Dirty War, out of fear for their safety, and his suspension of them when they refused. What he did not anticipate was that this suspension then would be interpreted as lifting the church's protection; the two men were soon arrested, detained, and tortured. Many years later, one of these priests forgave him; the other never did. We learn of Bergoglio's struggle with guilt for not having done more to save those targeted by the regime. We see how he carries within himself his own consciousness of sin and unworthiness as he goes into exile in Córdoba, Argentina, where his community has sent him after a tumultuous and divisive term.

Benedict, who by now has thawed considerably, listens and attempts to console Bergoglio. He confides his own sense of spiritual loneliness, and reveals his decision to resign the papacy. At the end of the scene, Benedict is moved to confess his own sins, and asks for sacramental absolution, which Bergoglio gives him despite being deeply shocked by what he has heard.

Anthony Hopkins and Jonathan Pryce in *The Two Popes*

COURTESY OF NETFLIX

The roles are now reversed. Bergoglio forgets about pressing Benedict to accept his resignation as archbishop and tries instead to dissuade Benedict from resigning the papacy. Why? Because tradition demands it! The reformer doesn't want so much change after all! Meanwhile, Benedict, loses his resistance to the prospect of Bergoglio as his successor. Maybe the man from Buenos Aires is just the person the church needs as pontiff. The defender of tradition becomes the one who breaks with tradition! And so we are to understand that the two men have looked into each other's hearts with compassion. This changes everything.

All of this, of course, is fiction. Despite the emotionally satisfying resolution of the film, we need to remember that none of this actually happened. The conversation never took place. Confession and forgiveness were neither sought nor received. Benedict never threw his weight behind Bergoglio in the 2013 conclave (according to many journalists, he favored Angelo

Scola of Milan and Marc Ouellet of Quebec), and in any case a retiring pope does not choose his successor. There is no evidence either that Benedict was particularly anxious about the prospect of Bergoglio stepping into his shoes, or that he changed his mind in the end. Although Francis has shown great kindness and solicitude toward his predecessor, the two have never become what you'd call buddies.

The most troubling fictionalization, however, is Benedict's confession to Bergoglio. Meirelles muffles the dialogue, so we don't actually hear what he says. But it seems we are to believe that Benedict confesses to knowingly reassigning predator priests—something not supported by his actual biography. The admission of guilt is prefaced by a vague reference to Marcial Maciel, the notorious sex abuser who founded the Legionaries of Christ. Ratzinger's role in that case, however, was quite different from that implied by the movie. Far from enabling Maciel, Ratzinger, in his capacity as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, strove to have him removed from ministry; it was John Paul II who resisted. As pope, Benedict finally got rid of Maciel, sentencing him to "a life of prayer and penance."

Did Ratzinger perhaps reassign predator priests while he was archbishop of Munich? Anything is possible, and certainly this sort of thing happened in many dioceses. But it is not a known fact that Benedict did so, and on a topic like this, an admission of guilt is far from a harmless artistic embellishment. This stuff is radioactive.

Obviously, Meirelles wanted to dramatize a relationship in which two men acknowledge their sins and confide in one another about their feelings of unworthiness for the great office they have been called to fill. And many viewers like to see antagonists arrive at forgiveness and reconciliation. The imagined dynamic between the two men is the most engaging aspect of the film, the most hilarious, and also the most meaning-laden—and the confession scene is part of it. Yet to suggest complicity in the sex-abuse scandals without a solid anchor in fact needlessly complicates things. Wasn't there something that Benedict actually felt remorseful about to depict instead?

Glorious journeys do unfold, despite all of our mistakes. And sometimes, tradition and progress meet—and embrace. That's the uplifting message of *The Two Popes*. If only it could happen in real-life Rome.

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**HANNAH GOLD**

# Zombie Flick

'Parasite'

A parasite is a homemaker. It makes a home inside its host. One might expect a certain decorum between parasite and host, then, a nod to nature going right when they meet—yet these relationships can be most unkind. The world's tiniest guillotine, a fly whose larvae embed within the bodies of fire ants, gains control of its host's mind, then decapitates it from the inside. Parasitic barnacles nicknamed "Loxo" invade the reproductive systems of sheep crabs and impregnate them with their larvae, a process that weakens the crab's immune system and prevents it from producing offspring of its own. Karl Marx gave the parasite a new rhetorical life as a metaphor for capital; for many of his readers the comparison has never lost its relevance. The cultural theorist and critic Mark Fisher elaborated on it in his cult-favorite 2009 essay, *Capitalist Realism*: "The most Gothic description of capital is also the most accurate. Capital is an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombie-maker; but the living flesh it converts into dead labor is ours, and the zombies it makes are us." In this zombie world of absolute capitalism, as Fisher describes it, all life has been reduced to destiny, and all homes to graves from which horrifying future generations will burst muttering about "engagement incentives" and "dynamic pricing."

South Korean director Bong Joon-ho's new family drama *Parasite* is a tightly acted, staged, and structured film, which also seems to be saying something profound about class warfare. In this way it's not unlike his runaway-train action flick *Snowpiercer* (2013), but it's immensely more thrilling: whereas in *Snowpiercer* each compartment was like a paragraph in a *Vox* "explainer" about why capitalism is bad, *Parasite*'s sections are drawn with greater discipline and ingenuity, their air more suffocating because there is no outside to them. Bong constructs for his didactic purposes two Seoul families. The Parks command immense wealth; the Kims are poor and especially down on their luck, forced to find succor in neighbors' Wi-Fi and to make ends meet as freelance pizza-box folders. But the families are otherwise ghostly images of one another, a neat nuclear counterpart in each of them: father, mother, son, daughter. And we quickly learn of another family, one even more ghostly: the team of employees, prized for their tactful invisibility, who pollinate the Parks' light-filled home like bees chained to their flowers.

At the start of the film the Kims are paid a visit by their son Ki-woo's school friend Min, who proposes that Ki-woo take his place tutoring

Cho Yeo-jeong as Mrs. Park in *Parasite*

the Parks' daughter, Da-hye, while he's abroad. The son quickly realizes after spending time in the Parks' house (designed by a famous and important artist!) that its inhabitants are highly susceptible to recommendations; they are too used to being served to have tastes of their own. Theirs is the pale technocratic posturing adopted by the gatekeepers of global capital. Not a universal language, but an international one. They like peppering their speech with English words and surrounding themselves with minimalist design. Their world is a sensual pinpoint from which nearly all smells, sights, tastes, and physical discomforts have been eliminated. We see them in their lavish home, or their car, or the Edenic, upscale supermarket, always immaculately sheltered. The Kims rightly identify this quality as a weakness, one they are keen on exploiting with their near-encyclopedic understanding of narcissism honed by the high level of competition required to earn a living wage, or at least one that keeps them joined together in their basement-level carapace. One by one the Kims, by brisk emotional subterfuge, replace the members of the Park family staff (with the exception of the daughter, for whom they invent a new position: child art therapist).

During that fateful visit Min also brings a stone with him. He refers to it as a "scholar's rock," a gift for his friend which is supposed to bless its owner with "material wealth." Ki-woo treats the rock as a sort of pet, exclaiming that it is "very metaphorical." It is very hard to resist writing about the stone. By the end of the film Ki-woo is literally hit over the head with it. That's only the most blunt example of the way the film communicates its stakes through metaphors drawn from the natural world. Ki-woo feels Da-hye's pulse during a tutoring session and tells her with all the authority he can muster that taking "a test is like slashing through the jungle." This is how they flirt. The prim, vapid Park family mother, Yeon-kyo, showers her three tiny, optimized dogs with far more affection and care than she does her hired homemakers. This is how she maintains her understanding of property—an understanding expressed in mannered moments that feed and cage the libidinal. In a funny and deeply troubling scene, the Parks discuss their driver's subhuman "smell," an infraction that "crosses a line," as a bit of foreplay before rubbing each other through their chaste pajama sets as if lubricated by silk. "Do it clockwise," Yeon-kyo pants as her husband paws her breast. "Buy me drugs!"

Midway through the film we're introduced to the husband of the household's suddenly supplanted maid. She's been hiding him from enemies he

owes money to in her employers' underground bunker, secretly funneling food to him for years. From this point on the parasite metaphor accrues ever more nauseating significance, encompassing people who need to hide in order to live, who dwell in basements for fear of extermination and inhale the sickening exhaust fumes of the militarized industrial state. The language of parasitism has lent itself most freely to the dead-set desires of dictators and national fascist projects—the American mythology of the "super-predator," the term "cockroach" to describe ethnic minorities in Hitler's Germany or 1990s Rwanda. It was reported amid the recent riots in Hong Kong that cops shouted "You are not a person! You are a cockroach" at protestors as they doused them with tear gas. Such world-historic horror cries out from Bong's careful screenplay like a semantic torture dungeon beneath the comedy of manners that prances upon its surface. Until the visceral torture begins.

Unlike most of Bong's latest films—*Okja* (2017), *Snowpiercer*, and *The Host* (2006)—with their elaborate fight and flight scenes, their animated sewer monsters and colossal pigs, *Parasite*'s staging is largely cerebral. Everything, from the impeccably neat and propulsive plotting, to the expressive domestic set pieces (the Kims' sunken basement home), to the ponderous textual symbolism suggests that this film has theater in its blood. It would work well as a three-ring circus, or staged as a house with two levels and another on the flipside. No intermission. The Parks' elaborate gated home, part class allegory, part *objet d'art*, is itself a makeshift set—the first floor and backyard were built from scratch upon an empty lot while the second floor was digitally rendered using a green screen. As with any good domestic horror tale, the home molds itself to fit the plot like heavy linen draped over a dining room table. It blueprints each character's destiny as they move through the space; it can be a hiding place, an escape route, or a lookout post, depending upon the story's demands. Whatever it is, it's a place where nothing grows.

*As with any good domestic horror tale, the home molds itself to fit the plot like heavy linen draped over a dining room table.*

Which is where this clever, immaculate film ultimately leads us. After a series of brutal plot twists turns murderous for each of the film's countervailing clans, the Kims' one bitter hope for reuniting what's left of their broken family is to replace the Parks and buy the beautiful artist house. Who or what is the parasite if the characters are ultimately disposable, interchangeable? It could be property, capital, commercialized art and artifice, all of them webbed together: "the system." Toward the film's end, before the final bloodshed, the Kims narrowly escape from the Parks' house and rush to their own in the midst of a torrential downpour, only to find it flooded, water nearly to the ceiling. Wading through a soup of their meager possessions, they save what little they can (they save the rock!) and pass out in a local gym that's been designated as a makeshift shelter. We have metaphors for what happened here going back at least to Genesis. There was an ark that saved the few by drowning the many and in doing so it re-enshrined order. *Parasite* tells us what we already know, and it's breathtaking.

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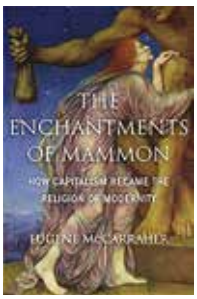
# Misenchantment

DAVID BENTLEY HART

I come to praise Eugene McCarraher (rather lavishly, in fact), not to bury him. But I may as well begin with a complaint, if only so as to appear evenhanded. In the penultimate paragraph of his enormous and extraordinary new book *The Enchantments of Mammon*, McCarraher conflates Alasdair MacIntyre's famous invocation of St. Benedict at the end of *After Virtue* with what has come misleadingly to be called the "Benedict Option," rejecting both together as though they were identical in meaning—which is to say, as if both offered a counsel of Christian disengagement from modern society and issued a call to withdrawal into isolated communities. This is an error. *The Benedict Option* is the title of an earnest but intellectually confused book by a journalist whose ultimate recommendations are difficult to discern amid the turbulences of his passions and anxieties. By contrast, the figure of St. Benedict as MacIntyre employs it has a very precise meaning: Benedict represents a moment when—in the lengthening twilight of a dissolving classical and Christian civilization—the slow labor of rescuing, recovering, and even reconstructing a unified Christian ethos was inaugurated. That labor began under the shelter of new forms of association located at the very heart of culture. MacIntyre's St. Benedict has nothing to do with disengagement, and everything to do with the preservation and redemption of communal memory and public reason.

The misunderstanding is unfortunate, since it strikes a discordant note just at the close of a book that might well be called symphonic in form, and in the course of which McCarraher sounds a great many McIntyrean themes of his own. Like MacIntyre, McCarraher is impatient with those tedious modern dogmatisms that masquerade as deliverances of enlightened and disinterested rationality. He too finds the modern displacement of any moral grammar based on the cultivation of virtues by a fragmentary ethos of private values, public platitudes, and voluntarist individualisms a depressing reality. He too laments the reduction of ethical reasoning to little more than assertions of the will and celebrations of private property as the supreme index of the good. He too refuses to consent to modern secularism's claims for itself, even while eschewing the traditionalist's politics of nostalgia. Above all, like MacIntyre, McCarraher both recognizes and detests capitalism's spoliations of creation and disintegration of communities, and casts a fond, forlorn eye toward the possibility of restoring a rationality of genuine human life.




**THE ENCHANTMENTS OF MAMMON**
How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity

EUGENE MCCARRAHER
Harvard University Press, $39.95, 816 pp.

But let me start again.

*The Enchantments of Mammon* is a magnificent book. It is, before all else, a sheer marvel of patient scholarship, history on a grand scale and in the best tradition of historical writing: a comprehensive account of the rise and triumph of capitalism in the modern age, not only as an economics, but also as our most pervasive and dominant system of ultimate values. But the book is far more than that. It is also a work of profound moral insight: a searing spiritual critique of a vision of reality that reduces everything mysterious, beautiful, fragile, and potentially transcendent in human experience to instances of—or opportunities for—acquisition and personal power, and that seeks no end higher than the transformation of creation's substantial goods into the lifeless abstraction of monetary value. It is, moreover, a work delightfully subversive of the standard story of how this vision of things progressively became the very shape of the world we all now share (or, I suppose it would be better to say, the world we do not really *share* at all).

In McCarraher's telling, capitalism as it has taken shape over the past few centuries is not the product of any kind of epochal "disenchantment" of the world (the Reformation, the scientific revolution, what have you). Far less does it represent the triumph of a more "realist" and "pragmatic" understanding of private wealth and civil society. Instead, it is another kind of religion, one whose chief tenets may be


Print by Max Eschle for the epic film *Mammon*, Munich, circa 1920

more irrational than almost any of the creeds it replaced at the various centers of global culture. It is the coldest and most stupefying of idolatries: a faith that has forsaken the sacral understanding of creation as something charged with God's grandeur, flowing from the inexhaustible wellsprings of God's charity, in favor of an entirely opposed order of sacred attachments. Rather than a sane calculation of material possibilities and human motives, it is in fact an enthusiast cult of insatiable consumption allied to a degrading metaphysics of human nature. And it is sustained, like any creed, by doctrines and miracles, mysteries and revelations, devotions and credulities, promises of beatitude and threats of dereliction. McCarraher urges us to stop thinking of the modern age as the godless sequel to the ages of faith, and recognize it instead as a period of the most destructive kind of superstition, one in which acquisition and ambition have become our highest moral aims, consumer goods (the more intrinsically worthless the better) our fetishes, and impossible promises of limitless material felicity our shared eschatology. And so deep is our faith in these things that we are willing to sacrifice the whole of creation in their service. McCarraher, therefore, prefers to speak not of disenchantment, but of "misenchantment"—spiritual captivity to the glamor of an especially squalid god.

It all began, of course, as a Christian heresy. Even if McCarraher rejects the notion that ours is an age of disenchantment, he recognizes that its intrinsic hostility to everything genuinely enchanting is itself a kind of rapture of the soul toward impalpable realms and unseen divinities. And this is partly because our age inherited all the sacred intuitions and longings for glorious transformation that earlier ages had directed toward a Kingdom supposedly not of this world. The dreams of one epoch inevitably yield to the disappointments of another. Still, the hunger for the sacred always persists, even as one way of life grows old, suppressed forces reassert themselves, and new ideas arise to fill in the spaces vacated by discarded certitudes. A great part of capitalism's power over our imaginations, McCarraher suggests, is derived from the authority it borrowed from a Christian language that had become detached from the larger rationality of the sacramental love of the world. And, while McCarraher holds no particular variety of Christian *wholly* responsible for these developments, he does not hesitate to assign particular blame where he thinks it just to do so.

He devotes, for instance, many extremely illuminating pages to the Puritan ethic, as it took shape first in Britain and then in the American colonies, and to the ways in which Puritan homiletics and moral discourse provided an empty rhetoric denouncing Mammon's seductions while quietly laying a firm basis for Mammon's reign. Above all, he shows how pernicious the Puritan language of godly "improvement" proved when used to justify—even to sanctify—what otherwise would have been called avarice and plunder.

INTERFOTO / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

What began as a destructive heresy in Britain—as factory manufacture displaced free artisanal production, and as enclosure of the commons progressively destroyed communal usufructs—was only made all the more pernicious by its transplantation to the New World. Here, bright with the luster of holiness but unencumbered by the cultural traces of older orders of spiritual value, it took deep root and flourished without hindrance. And, of course, it was this evangelical fervor for "improving" the land and the people who worked it that became the chief justification for displacing the native peoples of the New World, and for condemning them as lazy, unenterprising, sybaritic, and positively wicked in their preference for living off the land's bounty rather than transforming the wilds into fixed forms of private property. (McCarraher's treatment of John Winthrop's "theology of ethnic cleansing" is especially harrowing.)

Hence American Puritanism's ghastly combination of the unappeasable pursuit of ever-greater profit with a private ethos not of holy poverty, but of pious drabness. Hence too, America's historically unique fusion of the opulent and the barbaric, the devout and the rapacious. In a sense, America was born out of the transition from a Christian to a capitalist religious sensibility, mediated through the Puritan's odd inversion of Christianity's celebration of sacred dispossession into an ethos of unostentatious wealth. The baptismal waters of the Atlantic washed away the last lingering traces of a genuinely Christian vision of things, and what reached our shores was an altogether new religion. From the first, the nation was already set on its course toward consumer culture's counterfeit beatific vision, its zealous devotion to the technological domination of creation, and its unconquerable faith in the redemptive power of possessions righteously obtained and vigilantly protected. But only the most earnestly zealous of the apostles of this new faith could have imagined that theirs would one day become the sole unchallenged religion of the entire globe.

*As much as McCarraher's is a history of capitalism's slow but inexorable triumph, both as a concrete reality and as a transcendental ideal, it is also a more heartening history of resistance.*

This, though, is only a small part of McCarraher's narrative, which is too vast to distill into a summary in this space. And the value of the book lies not just in that grand overarching story, but also in the countless incidental details that throng the plot. On every page, there are poignant clarifications and illuminations and aperçus—the account of the Lockean elevation of monetary value over use-value, say, or observations of the legal personhood progressively ceded to joint-stock and limited-liability corporations, or bitter commentary on the rise of management theory and advertising strategies, and so forth. Moreover, as much as McCarraher's is a history of capitalism's slow but inexorable triumph, both as a concrete reality and as a transcendental ideal, it is also a more heartening history of resistance. The book tells not only of capitalism's most buoyant apologists but also of its most caustic critics and dissidents—the anarchists, socialists, communists, distributists, and Christian recusants of every kind. And even these critics and dissidents are scrupulously differentiated from one another in McCarraher's account, as are the varying degrees to which they either succeeded or failed in rejecting Mammon's enchantments to the end.

For instance, McCarraher is pitilessly honest about those forms of traditional socialism and communism that have all too often recapitulated the superstitions of industrial production and management, routinized labor, the technological conquest of nature, and the mechanisms of the modern nation-state. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, for example, McCarraher recognizes that the Marx who wrote the third volume of *Das Kapital*—with its elevation of unremitting labor over festal leisure, its fantasies of limitless manufacture and exploitation of the earth's resources, and its insistence on a total central control of production—was at the end of the day the most monstrously ambitious corporatist in human history, one whose ideas, if realized, would have changed all of life and the whole of the world into one gigantic factory, human labor transformed into a machine of relentless and joyless production. In fact, much of the secular left comes across in these pages as, at best, naïve about capitalism's power to absorb everything into the logic of the market and, at worst, complicit in that logic. One thing a reader will certainly take away from McCarraher's treatment of many forms of classical socialism is that capitalism's capacity for translating everything—even dissent from capitalism—into a kind of bourgeois commodity is all but infinite. And so his sympathies lie elsewhere.

McCarraher's is an essentially Christian Romantic vision. For him, the only true path of resistance to capitalism's destructive energies is one that leads away from the logic of the market: away, that is, from the idea that wealth-creation should be the highest constitutive good of any culture, and from the notion that technological power over nature should be the moral ideal of a sane human society. He longs instead for a truly sacral view of creation, approached with a sensibility open to transcendence. He longs for a culture that would treat nature not as a reservoir of morally neutral resources waiting to be converted into private affluence, but rather as an abundance freely given and freely shared within the embrace of a spiritual order of participation. Such

a culture would treat the good things of creation as sacramental mediations and signs of the divine mystery upholding all things. McCarraher's heroes are not so much Marx and Engels as John Ruskin and William Morris and others of similar disposition. And he has the discernment to recognize the potentially radical political philosophies latent in many places we might typically regard as lying altogether outside the political, such as John Muir's nature-mysticism. The common ethos to which he is principally devoted is one that relies first upon God's grace and love, as expressed in creation's heedless generosity, and that presumes a kind of immanent sacredness in the world available only to those who are willing to receive it as a common inheritance. What he desires is an ethics of personal wonder and of the cultural hunger for God's presence in the depths of things. It is an ethics, before all else, of the commons, permitted once again to flourish, to run to seed, to overflow, and to offer shelter to all.

So, in the end, while the story McCarraher tells is principally one of alienation and loss, idolatry and willful blindness to beauty, it is also a tale about all those lingering sparks of an older metaphysics of creation as divine glory that might still be gathered up and kindled into a full flame. Perhaps there might arise a new St. Benedict or two, or a few million, who could strive to overcome the ethics of sanctified greed that separates human beings from one another and from the rest of the natural world, and who might inspire a renewed awareness that the holiness of living things far surpasses the charms of lifeless wealth. McCarraher clearly believes that it is still possible to revive in ourselves, as late modern persons, a longing for the sort of abundance that is waiting for us when we do not seek to reduce everything into mere property. But this is an abundance visible only to love.

*McCarraher clearly believes that it is still possible to revive a longing for the sort of abundance that is waiting for us when we do not seek to reduce everything into mere property.*

I risk making McCarraher's book sound more rhapsodic than practical, and that would be an injustice. He understands that his is also a vision that requires a certain pragmatic economics, and he does not neglect material theory in recommending the spiritual values he believes in.

Of course, no story—or none worth telling—really has a single discrete beginning or a single definitive conclusion. Enormous as *The Enchantments of Mammon* is, it could well have been longer still. It might, if nothing else, have dwelt a little less exclusively on capitalism's "Anglo-Saxonism" (as the French would say), and perhaps explored at greater length the rise of capitalism in the late-medieval and early-modern Italian city-states, or the occult ties between early capitalist economics and Iberian colonialism in the Americas and the rebirth of chattel slavery. There are Catholic chapters perhaps yet to be added to the predominantly Protestant story that McCarraher tells. But no book can do everything and this one is already a majestic achievement. It will enjoy a long posterity, I think, in both the academic world and the world of the general readership. It is exhaustive, precise, and rich. But more important still, it is a work of great moral and spiritual intelligence, and one that invites contemplation about things we can't afford not to care about deeply.

**DAVID BENTLEY HART** *is a frequent contributor to* Commonweal. *His most recent book is* That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation *(Yale University Press).*

# How Francis Plays in Peoria

NANCY DALLAVALLE

Figuring out just what's going on with Catholics in the United States is a complex task. How significant is the increasing, if still relatively small, number of young men and women drawn to more traditional forms of religious life? What is the real impact of Nuns on the Bus, and does the ministry challenge or reinforce stereotypes? What about the persistent vitality of Marian devotion, from the streets of Little Italy to the Vietnamese Americans gathered in the fields of Carthage, Missouri, to the Guadalupe processions in Brownsville? The total number of U.S. Catholics keeps going up, so why are the rates of baptism and marriage falling?

The ongoing sex-abuse crisis in the church looms over all this, of course, and further complicates matters. Is the drip-drip-drip of sexual abuse and clerical cover-up the reason going to Mass or staying involved with the church now seems optional for so many—or were these revelations simply what pushed away for good those who already had one foot out the door?

These questions provide the backdrop to the one posed in the title of a recent book by Thomas Sweetser, SJ, *Can Francis Change the Church?* It's a slightly misleading way to frame what Sweetser is up to, suggesting that the pope might be able to bend a sprawling global church to his will. But Francis seems to know that's not the case, as when he invoked John XXIII's oft-cited motto in an interview he gave not long after becoming pope: "See everything; turn a blind eye to much; correct a little." Instead, Francis's real impact on U.S. Catholics, as Sweetser shows in a series of interviews, has more to do with the style of his papacy; indeed, the book's subtitle, *How American Catholics Are Responding to His Leadership*, is closer to its actual focus.

For many Catholics, especially those committed to the church but conflicted about it, the figure of "Pope Francis" has emerged as a beacon. He radiates an authentic and humble faith, and his compassionate face and emphasis on mercy serve as the ultimate counter-narrative for an institution that, in the public mind, seems to be mired in outmoded thinking, hypocrisy, and even bigotry. But even here the "response" of the faithful is not due to Francis's decisions as pope, such as who he appointed to key positions or what institutional reforms he's executed; little of that is followed closely by those in the pews. They are responding to his image and message, communicated via social media and television to an interconnected world.


**CAN FRANCIS CHANGE THE CHURCH?**
How American Catholics Are Responding to His Leadership

THOMAS SWEETSER, SJ
Crossroad, $16.95, 176 pp.

Francis was seriously considered for the papacy during the 2005 conclave that elected Benedict XVI, giving him time to think about the job and strategize his approach. His first gestures as pope—setting aside the trappings that usually accompany the assumption of the office and asking the assembled crowd to pray for him—were tailor-made for a media hungry to understand a figure little known to U.S. Catholics. It takes nothing away from his sincerity to recognize that these gestures had to have been planned in advance. They were not so much a renunciation of power as a new way of assuming it. To the extent Francis is trying to change the church, he is doing so by modeling a much more humble "way of proceeding," one that begins with the Gospel.

Has it made a difference among U.S. Catholics? Sweetser tries to provide an answer by reporting on a series of in-depth interviews he did with fifty-five Catholic adults: first in 2011–2012; then again in 2017, four years after Francis's 2013 election; and finally a short follow-up in 2018 given the re-emergence of the sex-abuse crisis. These Catholics were asked to reflect on their faith, selecting one of six themes to organize their response: "authority, liturgy, women's issues, sexuality, justice, spirituality or parish life."

The selection process, which drew on Sweetser's own contacts with parishioners, resulted in a fairly "inside" group. The core of this group is made up of the types of people who are adult-education regulars at many lively parishes in the Northeast or Midwest, but it is not exactly representative of today's diverse U.S. church. They tend to be older, white,

Pope Francis poses with a group during his general audience in Paul VI hall at the Vatican, December 11, 2019.

college-educated, and middle-class. Several work, or have worked, for the church; with few exceptions they have served as teachers, parish staff, or pastoral ministers, as spiritual directors, former priests, or religious. They also tend to be mainstream-to-liberal Catholics and even former Catholics. Sweetser recognizes that there were few traditionalists among them.

On the one hand, as a skilled pastor and longtime observer of parish life, Sweetser is well positioned to hear these voices. The dynamics of these conversations are familiar to him, and his task is to lift up what he has heard and present it in a useful way. He portrays his interlocutors in a sympathetic manner, often describing them as "intelligent" or "thoughtful."

Sweetser's approach, however, left this reader fidgety after a few entries, wishing he would press his friends a bit. He treats the process more as an election-season focus group than a searching conversation with adult Catholics: there are no targeted follow-up questions, no hints that an observation might be shortsighted or unfair, overly generous or ill-informed. Statements that could be challenged or more carefully parsed—"the unjust way women are treated in the Church"—are simply recorded. It made me wish for the "outtakes" from these sessions, the more direct exchanges that would happen in a genuine dialogue.

Which points to a broader question: the survey framework itself. The average adult in the pew may not be thinking according to the themes Sweetser chose. "Spirituality" would make sense to many, but "liturgy" as a concept (other than "going to Mass") might not be all that clear. The more telling points seep in, then, around the edges: a deep sense of alienation from a rigid and uncaring institution (a defining moment for several interviewees is a change, with no parish input, from a beloved pastor to one perceived as distant and authoritarian); a generational disconnect from parish life; and moral revulsion at the pervasive hypocrisy of the clergy on human sexuality.

It is to these sensibilities that Pope Francis appeals. But will any of this make a difference, drawing people to the church either for the first time or the first time in a long time? It depends. One interesting observation from Sweetser points to a 2015 Pew Research Center survey that describes the U.S. population as 21 percent Catholic, 9 percent ex-Catholic, and 9 percent "cultural Catholic," with another 8 percent having "other connections" to Catholicism. Rather than focusing on convincing ex-Catholics to return, he perceptively suggests that "cultural Catholics"—those raised as Catholic or married to a Catholic—are a group that might become more deeply engaged with, and committed to, the church during the Francis era. This insight recognizes the importance of social forces in these situations; it is unwise to hope for many static conversions. One of the hallmarks of those who remained affiliated with the church over the span of his own survey is a distinctly *social* affirmation: they are "proud to be Catholic."

And yet. Even the claim "proud to be Catholic" is increasingly under stress as polarization continues to escalate in all areas of American life. Proud of what, exactly? The heroic work of Catholic sisters? The firing of gay teachers at Catholic high schools? The words and witness of Pope Francis have not been enough to bridge such divides in an increasingly politicized U.S. church. In a short chapter on parish life since Francis's election, another dimension of this emerges: Francis's impact is seen happening to "the church," not the local parish. He might be offering a new vision for Catholics "at large," but several respondents noted that this didn't seem to matter in their own parishes. As one admitted, "The weird thing is that it has gotten worse."

While Sweetser doesn't solve this and other problems, his short, lively book is an ideal starting point for a thoughtful program of parish renewal. Many churchgoers will recognize their own questions and reservations, and symptoms evident in their own parishes. Even those working in places and with people not represented in Sweetser's book will find much to consider. It makes this much clear: real solutions to the challenges facing the church will not come from "above," but will have to emerge from the types of conversations that Sweetser had with parishioners. Perhaps the question is not whether Francis can change the church, but if we can.

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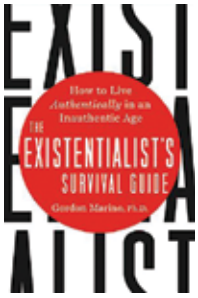
CNS PHOTO / PAUL HARING

# Philosopher in the Ring

STEVEN KNEPPER

Gordon Marino teaches philosophy at St. Olaf College and curates the Hong Kierkegaard Library. He has spent decades writing about the existentialists. His passion for them did not begin in the classroom, though. After a failed relationship, with derailed careers in both boxing and academic philosophy, a young Marino struggled with suicidal thoughts. While waiting for a counseling session, he spotted a copy of Søren Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* on a coffee-shop bookshelf. He opened it to a passage in which Kierkegaard criticizes a "conceited sagacity" that refuses to believe in love. Intrigued, Marino hid *Works of Love* under his coat on the way out the door. He credits the book with saving his life. "At the risk of seeming histrionic," Marino writes, "there was a time when Kierkegaard grabbed me by the shoulder and pulled me back from the crossbeam and the rope." In Kierkegaard and other existentialists, Marino found philosophers who wrote in the first person, took moods and emotions seriously, and kept up a staring contest with despair. While these eclectic thinkers often had qualms about the professoriate, they led Marino back to academic philosophy. He returned with an older conception of philosophy as a way of life and a pursuit of wisdom, a conception the existentialists helped renew and one that animates this compelling study of them.

*The Existentialist's Survival Guide* provides a brisk thematic survey of existentialism, with chapters on "Anxiety," "Depression and Despair," "Death," "Authenticity," "Faith," "Morality," and "Love." Marino acknowledges that the existentialist label can imply a false unity. Of the thinkers he discusses, only Jean-Paul Sartre actually called himself an existentialist. Marino's existentialists share a certain stance and some broad concerns, but they often disagree with each other. He takes Kierkegaard, a nineteenth-century forebear of Sartre and company, as his main philosophical guide, but he also draws insights from Friedrich Nietzsche, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Simone de Beauvoir, Ralph Ellison, Albert Camus, and Miguel de Unamuno, among others.




**THE EXISTENTIALIST'S SURVIVAL GUIDE**
How to Live Authentically in an Inauthentic Age

GORDON MARINO
HarperOne, $16.99, 272 pp.

Like the existentialists, Marino is not afraid to philosophize in the first person and to write with literary flair. He praises "the sheer ability of these writers to move the waters of language and their engagement with the hurly-burly of real life." Marino deserves the same praise. He weaves his life story into his survey of existentialism, and he tells this story with hard-hitting candor. Marino had a brief career as a pro boxer, and he has maintained a second career as a boxing coach. He relays anecdotes from both ring and classroom. Boxing heavyweights like Mike Tyson and academic heavyweights like Philip Rieff show up to teach Marino difficult lessons. In the chapter titled "Authenticity," for instance, he recalls an afternoon walk with Tyson. Marino acted like a fellow "member of the elite fistic brotherhood," and Tyson seemed to accept him as such, "saying, 'Guys like you and me…'" Marino recalls:

> I suppose I had pulled the charade off, or Iron Mike let me think I had pulled it off, but I immediately felt that body blow of inauthenticity. I had managed to wrap myself in borrowed clothes, and though I did not correct Tyson, I felt like the not-so-great imposter. Camus again: if you want to be authentic, "don't try to seem." But some of us who might not be so at home in our skin will have to try "to try not to seem."

In the chapter on "Love," Marino recalls visiting Rieff's office in graduate school to tell his teacher that he had placed an essay in a prestigious journal. After brief congratulations, Rieff chastised Marino for not "progressing as much as he would have liked. He ended our meeting with a hand on my shoulder and a stern look in the eye, 'Gordon, if you really care about your students, you will tell them the messy truths, even if it makes them angry.'"

Throughout *The Existentialist's Survival Guide*, Marino tells how Kierkegaard helped his lifelong struggle with depression. Marino responded to Kierkegaard's exhortation to push through the fog of depression in order to care for others. He learned from the

chronically melancholic Dane to transform paralyzing thoughts of death into a sense of urgency: "At the risk of being pedantic, the Kierkegaardian understanding of death might be this: don't be careless with the people you walk through life with. Don't have arguments and leave them unsettled." Kierkegaard showed Marino how to draw a distinction between depression and despair, and how to guard against the former becoming the latter. Marino discovered through Kierkegaard that anxiety can "prod us to trust in God, or if God raises your hackles, trust in the idea that we weren't put on this earth just to play golf and sip martinis on the beach."

Marino thinks these are particularly timely insights. He does not dismiss pharmaceutical advances in mental-health treatments and recognizes that they have brought lifesaving relief for many. But for others, including Marino, medicine has not provided a full or lasting solution. Marino thinks there is a danger in reducing all depression and anxiety to "neurochemical squalls." We end up brushing away existential concern, for instance, about the loss of loved ones or our own death. The existentialists, as well as counselors they influenced, helped Marino cope with and at times even learn from his depression. Marino calls for a renewed, non-reductive approach to depression and anxiety—the kind of approach we find in the existentialists at their best—to complement pharmaceutical advances.

*Marino convincingly argues that Kierkegaard's dutiful love is too dismissive of tender feelings. In the end, though, he sides with Christian existentialism against the skepticism of love in Nietzsche and Sartre.*

Lessons from the ring come to the fore late in the book. Courage does not receive its own chapter, but Marino presents it as a necessary virtue in a harsh world. He explains that apprentice boxers often struggle to stay close to their sparring partners. They flinch away from the punches, inadvertently opening themselves to harder blows. As a coach, Marino stands

> behind the person on defense so that he or she cannot step out of the pocket. When they fall back I don't hesitate to scold, "Come on, be brave!" And if my boxer happens to be one of my philosophy students, I might even add a snarky Nietzschean invocation, "Come on—live dangerously!"

Still, Marino champions no vulgar will-to-power. Nor is his love of boxing uncritical. The ring can give rise to a brazen sense of superiority and a propensity to quick violence. Yet it can also teach one to manage anger and anxiety and to be vulnerable with others. Indeed, Marino's memoir suggests that Kierkegaard helped him develop from the former sort of boxer into the latter.

Marino insists throughout that we need not only courage and toughness but also love and tenderness. These virtues are not opposed to each other. It takes courage to set aside one's own needs in order to care for others, and it also takes courage to open oneself to love, especially the kind of love that accepts one's flaws. Marino sees a prideful, vicious rejection of such love in Dostoevsky's "underground man." He claims that "one of the messages in this brutal book seems to be that pride impedes our ability to accept Christ's love and forgiveness." With characteristic candor, Marino shares times when he was himself an "underground man." Still, his love for family, friends, and students is palpable throughout the book, as is his gratitude for those who

have given him the gift of love—some of them strangers. He recalls a time when he was hospitalized for depression. A fellow patient, herself hospitalized for a suicide attempt, would bring him "a cup of coffee in the morning and offer encouraging words. She could reach through her pain." She helped him through his crisis, and she provided a model of love to which he could aspire.

In the concluding chapter, Marino returns to Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*, the book that saved him as a young man. Kierkegaard presents love as a duty and insists "that we are [also] duty bound to presuppose an essential ability to love in everyone, not only in people we feel simpatico toward but also in those whom we cut across the street to avoid." Marino points to how "everyday people frequently lay down their lives for others, often strangers." He convincingly argues that Kierkegaard's dutiful love is too dismissive of tender feelings. In the end, though, he sides with the Christian existentialism of Kierkegaard against the skepticism of love in Nietzsche and Sartre. (Other religious existentialists—Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Luther King Jr.—could have come to his aid.) Marino thinks we can learn much from the Nietzschean suspicion of motives, but he, like Kierkegaard, ultimately turns such suspicion around:

> You can always construct an explanation that seems to unmask the selfish aims behind supreme acts of love and self-sacrifice. Perhaps the most attractive aspect of the claim that there are no unselfish actions is that they conveniently free us from feeling duty bound to take a few steps along the same path.

Love may open up a deeper freedom, the courage to risk oneself for something that transcends narrow self-interest. Marino's study ultimately offers an existentialist reworking of an old Gospel lesson: to save our lives we might need to risk them in love.

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# American Universities Abroad

**GEORGE DENNIS O'BRIEN**


**STANDING FOR REASON**
The University in a Dogmatic Age

JOHN SEXTON
Yale University Press, $26, 240 pp.

University presidents often indulge in rhetorical flourishes about the importance of reason in the academy and the public square. In his short book *Standing for Reason: The University in a Dogmatic Age*, John Sexton, recently retired president of New York University, moves beyond such formulaic encomia to offer a clear description of reason in action as a cure for the mindless dogmatism that infects us in the age of Twitter.

Commentators on higher education invariably regard their own intellectual history as general truth. Sexton's trajectory from Brooklyn Prep to president of the country's largest private university is, however, unusual in the extreme. How do you start with a 2.1 GPA in college and go anywhere in higher education? There were miraculous turns along the way. No less an eminence than Tim Healy, SJ, chastised Sexton for his miserable college performance: "You have disappointed us." Fordham University was, however, initiating a new PhD program in religion and needed students. Healy offered Sexton a fellowship.

Having completed his graduate work, Sexton taught religious studies for ten years at St. Francis in Brooklyn ("the small college with big dreams"), ending as chair of the department. A longtime interest in the law led him to apply to law school. He was turned down by all New York law schools, but—another fortuitous intervention—Laurence Tribe, a preeminent scholar of constitutional law, recommended Sexton to Harvard. He was accepted there and the rest unfolds as a plausible path to high office: appointment to NYU Law School, dean, and president.

That, at least, is an external account of Sexton's career; there is also an internal story that leads directly to his defense of reason. That tale starts with Charlie Wimans, an inspiring lay teacher at Fordham Prep, who suggested that Sexton join the

school debate team. Not only was Sexton good at debate, he was named national champion in his senior year. He was so enthusiastic about debate that he offered to coach the debate team at his sister's high school. Sexton notes that debate "framed the next fifteen years of my life.... [I]t opened my world in unimaginable ways—intellectual, social, even spiritual. It provided the most formidable element of my education." Debate as Sexton practiced and taught it is a formal process that encapsulates his view of reason in the academy and the public arena. Formal debate begins with a proposition to be defended or attacked. Debaters do not know in advance whether they will be asked to argue the affirmative or negative, so they prepare for both. Debate proceeds through a number of rounds of constructive argument and rebuttal, followed by a determination of the winner by designated judges. Two aspects of formal debate express important rules for rational argument. In-depth study of both sides of an argument assures that any position arrived at recognizes the force of counterarguments and countervailing evidence. The legal world to which Sexton turned exemplifies a pattern of debate. Lawyers must anticipate the arguments of the opposing party while advancing their own case through facts, reasonable conjecture, and rebuttal.

It makes sense to construct a model of reason for higher education on the foundation of debate; indeed, the first universities were built on just such a model. One can argue that the ideological base of university study was contained in Peter Abelard's *Sic et Non* (1115–1117). The major difference between formal debate and law on the one hand and the university on the other is that the former have designated judges or juries. Who judges an advance toward truth in the academy? Philosophic pragmatists like John Dewey, rejecting "the quest for certainty," believed that the ongoing academic disciplines served as continual critique. In the long run arguments would be judged by a consensus of professional scholars. I think Sexton would be happy enough with that view, but he underpins it with Teilhard's notion of the evolutionary convergence of culture.

Sexton's overall narrative starts with high-school debate and ends with examining the clash of cultures in "the global university" or, as he sometimes labels it (with a nod to Vatican II), "the ecumenical university." Under his leadership, NYU established full-fledged university programs at "portal campuses" in Abu Dhabi and Shanghai. The full range of NYU's facilities and faculties are potentially available to students who enter a portal campus. Sexton argues that in an economically and politically globalized world, the global university will be the pattern for our leading academic institutions.

Establishing portal campuses in foreign jurisdictions and cultures raises obvious questions. Is an American university just another mode of cultural imperialism? Given the highly selective nature of the student bodies at the portal campuses, does it foster elitism? Will academic freedom be compromised when universities exist in countries where freedom of expression is often curtailed? Will Sexton's core values of the university tradition—"intellectual integrity, tolerance of difference...willingness to encourage unorthodox ideas...unflagging commitment to the pursuit of truth"—conflict with local culture or politics?

Sexton is confident that these challenges can be met. The global university points toward a "global civil society," not economic or political hegemony. Students at the NYU portal campuses may be intellectual "elites" but, thanks to generous financial aid, are as likely to come from a remote village as from a cosmopolitan center. Distinguishing as appropriate between academic freedom and the civil right to free speech, Sexton says that the portal-campus classroom is quite open, whatever prudence may be required for those taking positions in the public square. Despite his assurance, I would be wary about this last challenge. Academic freedom is a core

value of the modern academy, and while it may be conceptually distinct from the civil right to free speech, the two are not so easily disentangled in practice.

Although the portal campuses are open to the resources of a world-class research university, Sexton notes that the actual course of study in Abu Dhabi and Shanghai is similar to that of "the most prestigious liberal-arts colleges in the United States." But there are really two traditions of the liberal arts: the older *artes liberales* and the so-called "liberal free tradition." While both traditions use the debate model that Sexton extols, they have differing foundations and purposes. *Artes liberales,* the core of higher education from ancient Greece until very recent times, trained political and moral leaders to conserve the laws and traditions of the *polis.* This kind of liberal-arts education placed high value on authority: political and moral wisdom enshrined in classic texts and traditions. The "liberal free" view of the liberal arts is more intellectual than practical, more interested in discovering personal insight than in transmitting a political or moral tradition.

I assume that the liberal arts in the portal campuses are in the liberal free tradition now common in American colleges. The portal campuses reside, however, in states that privilege religious or ideological authority and would, for this reason, seem well suited to the *artes liberales* tradition. Sunni Islam in Abu Dhabi looks to the Qur'an, Shanghai to Communist orthodoxy. Will liberal free study come to be regarded as frivolous—or, worse, as a political danger? That is how traditionalists in the United States have regarded it, going back to William F. Buckley's *God and Man at Yale* and continuing to present-day attacks on the academy by cultural and religious conservatives. Dogmatism still has its champions, here and abroad.

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## BOOKS IN BRIEF


**CODE RED**
How Progressives and Moderates Can Unite to Save Our Country
E. J. DIONNE JR.
St. Martin's Press, $27.99, 272 pp.

**In his new book *Code Red,*** *Washington Post* columnist and *Commonweal* contributing writer E. J. Dionne Jr. addresses all Americans who see the Trump presidency as existentially threatening to a democratic, compassionate, and equitable United States. Dionne pleads with progressive and moderate liberals not to let policy disagreements divide them as they seek to unseat Donald Trump in 2020; the Democrats' success in the 2018 midterm elections is proof that such unity is necessary to defeat an increasingly radical Republican Party. Moderates and progressives must learn to cooperate and use each other's strengths: moderates' hard-nosed coalition-building and negotiation of disagreements, and progressives' vision for systemic change and refusal to tolerate disingenuous right-wing rhetoric. One approach without the other will likely hand Donald Trump a second term.


**I'M TELLING THE TRUTH, BUT I'M LYING**
BASSEY IKPI
Harper Perennial, $15.99, 272 pp.

**Bassey Ikpi's world is messy,** nerve-wracking, glowing with the blue light of online shopping at three in the morning, sharp as her collarbones when she hasn't been eating, vivid as the Nigerian family parties of her childhood. The essays that comprise *I'm Telling the Truth, but I'm Lying* are deeply personal and immersive, filled with details that change just as Ikpi admits her memories often do, revealing a "patchwork of feelings and sensations" that carry the reader through her failed relationships, complicated familial interactions, steady friendships, and bipolar II diagnosis. Ikpi refuses to sugarcoat; we feel the crushing weight of her rapidly cycling phases of mania and muted depression. But her continued survival is its own triumph—the end of the book feels like a sunrise after a sleepless night.

**THE CORNER THAT HELD THEM**
SYLVIA TOWNSEND WARNER
New York Review Books, $16.95, 424 pp.

**The sisters of England's remote Oby convent** have little time for spiritual reflection, consumed as they are with worldly demands—mostly related to keeping the place running. Sylvia Townsend Warner's tale of fourteenth-century monastic life is not a historical novel so much as an account of women in community contending with quotidian annoyances, from the economic to the interpersonal (one disliked nun is described with collective relief as "sickly, and not likely to cumber them for more than a year or so"). Men are another source of headaches: a miserly prior, an impostor priest, a remote but controlling bishop; when asked a simple question, they always "respond with a treatise." No single protagonist carries the reader through these decades of daily routine, and there isn't really a plot; Warner breathes a world into being through witty prose and vivid imagination.

# The Story or the Truth?

PAUL BAUMANN

Rachel Cusk, the best-selling British author of what has been called the "Outline" trilogy—*Outline* (2014), *Transit* (2016), and *Kudos* (2018)—has been celebrated for altering the basic narrative and thematic structure of the novel by abandoning traditional aspects of plot and character development. These arresting fictions are composed almost entirely of a series of monologues retold by the narrator, Faye, a writer and divorced mother of two children. Beyond what is revealed in conversation, the backstories of Faye's various interlocutors, and of Faye herself, remain offstage. The men and women who engage Faye rarely ask her any questions. In most of the exchanges, she remains silent, making little effort, beyond the occasional snide remark, to inform the reader of her reactions. She is evidently the wounded survivor of some domestic upheaval. Despite her passive, self-effacing presence, Cusk's narrator is a captivating figure, a sharp-tongued woman with a steely gaze, a droll sense of humor, and a skeptical tolerance for the self-absorption of those she encounters. Part of the trilogy's mystique, beyond Cusk's spare, propulsive prose, are the parallels between the author's well-known personal life and that of her fictional protagonist. This is autobiographical fiction of a rare intimacy and intensity.

Cusk is the author of seven other novels, and before shaking up the literary world with her trilogy, she wrote three controversial memoirs. The first, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, describes in often hilarious detail the ambivalence she, as an ardent feminist, felt about pregnancy, childbirth, and satisfying the unappeasable needs of her infant daughters. Cusk is hardly the first woman to confess mixed feelings in that regard, but the often blunt way she writes about her frustrations, and her focus on her own thwarted desires, drew much criticism. Next came *The Last Supper: A Summer in Italy*, the story of her family's three-month sojourn in Tuscany, including a visit to Assisi. Cusk can be a merciless judge of others, be they bumbling British tourists or native Italians, but she is just as hard on herself. Her judgments, both artistic and moral, are as astringent as they are surprising.

Perhaps most controversial of all was *Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation*, about her divorce from the father of her children. "Why had I destroyed my home?" Cusk asks.

> My husband believed that I had treated him monstrously. This belief of his couldn't be shaken: his whole world depended on it. It was his story, and lately I have come to hate stories. If someone were to ask me what disaster this was that had befallen my life, I might ask if they wanted the story or the truth.

It is precisely the difference between stories and the truth, between illusion and reality, that Cusk so vividly explores in her three genre-defying novels.


**COVENTRY**

RACHEL CUSK

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, $27, 250 pp.

The essays collected in *Coventry* are marked by the same writerly assurance and iconoclastic temperament. The book opens with "Driving as Metaphor," about the maddeningly crowded roads in Cusk's coastal region of England. What is the story she tells herself about her exasperation behind the wheel? Why does she react so petulantly to a situation that, much like Faye's encounters with various monologists, is beyond her control? "I find myself wondering at the nature of the story," Cusk writes about the situation that seems to have befallen her. "Riven with contradictions, and inconsistencies, beset by problems of point of view," she concludes, "its relationship to the truth is opaque."

In the book's title essay, Cusk comes to terms with her parents' willingness to permanently break off communication with her over some perceived slight, which in England is known as being "sent to Coventry." "All of my life I have been terrified of Coventry, of its vastness and bleakness and loneliness, and of what it represents, which is ejection from the story." Now in her fifties, she embraces exile from the story of her family. Cusk was raised Catholic and educated in a convent school, and in

"On Rudeness," a meditation on Brexit, she notes that Jesus was often terse but never rude. Rudeness has been the hallmark of the Brexit debate and of much of public life generally. "The test, it is clear, is to tell rudeness from truth, and in the Bible that test is often failed," she writes. "An unambiguous event—violence—is therefore required. The episode of the crucifixion is an orgy of rudeness whose villains are impossible to miss."

Cusk concludes her essay on rudeness by confessing she had long strived for impartiality in her life and work. Impartiality, she now acknowledges, is elusive, to say the least. In retrospect, her desire for the justice impartiality seemed to promise was an attempt to "return the world to something I could bear to live in, without necessarily understanding it first." Understanding, which requires a great deal of listening and watchfulness, is the task she now seems to have set for herself as a writer. The essay "How to Get There" is a brilliant discussion of what imaginative writing requires. It takes real powers of imagination to see beyond the everyday "stories" we use to veil reality, to see what is stubbornly before our eyes, and to describe it accurately. "The past is hidden," Cusk writes, quoting Proust, "beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling." Social observation and a fierce attention to the material world are the indispensable tools for recapturing that sensation on the page. From such base materials fiction can take flight. "A writer who knows how to give subjective content an objective form can be as far-fetched as she likes," Cusk writes. "A writer who doesn't can make even the most creditable things unbelievable."

*Coventry* reprints two chapters from Cusk's previous memoirs, one from *Aftermath* and the other from *The Last Supper*. Presumably these essays are included because they bear a particular importance for her and her work. The chapter from *Aftermath* is where she declares her hatred of stories, quoted above. It also features a brief reminiscence of how history was taught in her Catholic school. Here, as elsewhere, Cusk draws a connection between suffering and creativity, a relationship her history teacher dwelled on. One of the "pitfalls of modern family life," Cusk suggests, is not to "take precautions against the human need for war." The debilitating battle with her husband, however harrowing, was ultimately the source of a newfound energy and ambition in her writing. We are not masters of our own fate.

Rachel Cusk

"I am Nothing, I am Everything," the chapter from *The Last Supper*, concerns her family's visit to Assisi, and explores memories of her Catholic girlhood. "It is Sunday," she writes.

> The great grey drifting sky, so deep overhead and unalleviated, recalls the Sundays of my childhood with their strange double nature of privation and feasting, a character impassable and final in its duality.... I still have a Sunday feeling, even now; a feeling that is like a bruise or mark on the skin, that is tender when it is touched.

Tender as a bruise, but also, it seems, tender as something to treasure.

Cusk is repulsed by the "giantism" of Assisi's architecture and by the sheeplike procession of pilgrims hurrying past astonishing works of Renaissance art to genuflect before the bones of St. Francis. "The mania for the tangible is the predictable consequence of the intangibility of religious belief," she writes. St. Francis's extreme practices of self-denial both fascinate and repel her, and she judges his asceticism to be "a pure brand of nihilism." Francis's great love poem, "Canticle of the Creatures," is a morbid hosanna not to creation but to "the unpopulated earth." Cusk wants to celebrate a competing Christian impulse, one found in the "confidence and sociability and insatiable love of humankind" in Renaissance art. As the essay draws to a close, she softens her assessment of the pilgrims and the veneration of relics. "It is meaning we have come for, of one sort or the other. But most of all it is sympathy, sympathy that we want and must have, only sympathy, from bones or from paint."

Cusk ends the essay with a story about a relic of her own, a small statue of St. Francis she had been given for her First Holy Communion and that remained in her bedroom for years. For reasons she cannot explain, she had retrieved the statue from her parents' house and placed it in her own children's room. Even after it was knocked from a shelf and broken, she was unable to discard it. Instead she collected the broken pieces and "hid them in the back of a cupboard," where they seem to remain a presence. The sensation attached to such a treasured material object, as Proust observed, somehow grants access to the past and all it means to us. It is just such a "Sunday feeling," heavy with the past, that permeates Cusk's writing and artistic vision.

**PAUL BAUMANN** *is* Commonweal*'s senior writer.*

# No-Bullshit Spirituality

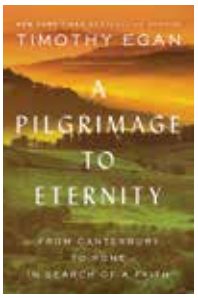
SANTIAGO RAMOS

Hiking somewhere near the Italian mountain town of Aosta, about five hundred miles from Rome, Timothy Egan's feet began to hurt. "The toes on my right foot are a throbbing mess of bubbled blisters." He can barely move. "The best I can do is wrap them in tape and treat the skin later with antiseptic and cushions." That won't be much help. Fifty miles later, near Piverone, he reports: "a bloody mess of skin, gauze, blood and pus." Further down, in Pavia, Egan's feet are "hamburger." While numbering the lessons he learned from completing, mostly by foot, the Via Francigena—a thousand-mile religious pilgrimage spanning four European countries—Egan writes: "I will never hike without blister medication."

*A Pilgrimage to Eternity: From Canterbury to Rome in Search of a Faith* is a lofty title, and this book, a travelogue with essayistic interludes, addresses lofty themes in theology, philosophy, history, and politics. But the wince-inducing foot-related asides make the book what it is: a personal story of pilgrimage. Foot-talk is a central part of pilgrimage, and any modern pilgrim will relate to Egan's agony. What can I do to avoid blisters? Should I buy waterproof boots? When do I switch to sandals? Waxy plaster or gauze? To pop or not to pop? Disgusting, no doubt. But the stinging pain, along with the apparent lack of medical consensus on foot care, helps the pilgrim abandon any illusions of having things all figured out and under control. A months-long pilgrimage isn't a pleasant stroll accompanied by intellectual contemplation. It is a physical as well as a spiritual project.

The Via Francigena ("the road that comes from France") dates at least as far back as the ninth century. It is a series of interconnecting paths, starting in Canterbury, that leads pilgrims all the way to the seat of the bishop of Rome, crossing through France and Switzerland. In his mid-sixties Timothy Egan, the author of several commercially successful books and a *New York Times* columnist, found himself lost in a dark wood, ruminating over various experiences of suffering, needing "a stiff shot of no-bullshit spirituality." At the beginning of his book he considers himself "an Irish Catholic by baptism, culture, and upbringing," one who is "lapsed but listening," though still a "skeptic."

In search of answers, he chooses not only to read and think but also to walk a pilgrim path that has been trodden by centuries' worth of fellow seekers. He is also inspired by the rise of Pope Francis, which Egan considers a sign of rebirth in Christianity. He hopes to get an audience with the pope once he reaches Rome.




**A PILGRIMAGE TO ETERNITY**
From Canterbury to Rome in Search of a Faith

TIMOTHY EGAN
Viking, $28, 384 pp.

Most chapters in this book focus on different sites along the Via and the historical figures associated with them. Rich in detail and anecdote, many of these pieces could stand alone as magazine articles. At Canterbury Cathedral, Egan ruminates on the life of the martyr Thomas Becket and Justin Welby, the current leader of the Anglican Communion. He connects a small monastery near the French village of Wisques with thoughts about Benedict of Nursia. In Corbény, he reflects on Joan of Arc and the role of women in the church. Langres makes him think of Denis Diderot; Lausanne, of Martin Luther; Geneva, of Michael Servetus (the Unitarian beheaded by John Calvin).

These historical portraits serve as a point of departure for big moral questions. Egan grapples with the Wars of Religion, the Inquisition, the Crusades, and other occasions when Christian leaders declared it to be "no longer a sin to take the life of a fellow human, so long as that human was a declared enemy of the church." Egan is interested in church history because one of the main questions motivating his pilgrimage is whether it is reasonable to believe in the claims of the Christian faith when so many crimes have been committed by Christians. After all, "a higher percentage of Europeans died in intra-Christian wars than in the industrial carnage of the Great War."

The sins of the Catholic Church are, in this regard, also the sins of its Protestant critics, and even of the modern trailblazers who want to completely replace the church with secular institutions. Luther translated the Bible and stood up to clerical tyranny, but also wrote malicious anti-Semitic tracts that incited violence. Calvin set up a Christian utopia that beheaded dissenters. Secular French revolutionaries sacked monasteries and killed peasants. Egan writes about all these things. Ultimately, it seems that evil itself—rather than just the evils done by Christians—

HEMIS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

poses a problem for Egan's search for faith. It is an old problem: Why would a good God allow so much suffering in the world?

Unfortunately, Egan rejects the best resource that his own tradition has for tackling this problem. Twice he takes up the topic of Augustine of Hippo, one of the most penetrating thinkers on the problem of evil, only to dismiss him as "a very confused man" who "hated" sex. He "embraced the philosophy of dualism" and came close to calling the human body an evil thing. Augustine squares the existence of evil in history with the existence of an all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful God by placing all the blame on human agency, thus giving God "a pass." But Augustine's "philosophy of *shit happens*" does not absolve God, Egan argues, because if God is truly all-knowing, then he must see all evil deeds "unspooling in advance."

Reading Egan on Augustine, you wouldn't guess the extent of this "very confused" man's influence—not only for Christian theology, but also for philosophy and literature. To cite some random, post-1900 examples: Edmund Husserl began his lectures on time and consciousness by declaring: "our modern age, so proud of its knowledge, has failed to surpass or even to match the splendid achievement of [Augustine] who grappled so earnestly with the problem of time." Ludwig Wittgenstein opens his *Philosophical Investigations* with a passage from Augustine concerning language. Memoirist and biographer Francine du Plessix Gray called Augustine "the first great autobiographer." Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben found in Augustine useful ideas with which to critique the current political order. Augustine has his shortcomings, especially with regard to sexuality. But a thinker who has inspired such a diverse array of people should not be so lightly dismissed.

On the problem of evil, Augustine's response begins with the notion that God is absolute Being, lacking nothing, outside of time, unchanging, and perfectly good. The universe and humans along with it are separated from God and are in time, which is another way of saying that we are subject to constant change. The human self is fragmented by time and desire, never whole and at peace, and looking for satisfaction in the wrong places: power, lust, money. "Our heart is restless until it rests in you," Augustine writes. In our restlessness, we act rashly and harshly, vying to dominate our fellow human beings. The universe itself fragments into disorder, manifesting itself as disease and natural disasters. That's why "shit happens."

Cipressi di San Quirico d'Orcia in Tuscany, as seen from the Via Francigena

In his *Confessions*, Augustine records a consoling thought that came to him after his conversion: "I no longer wished individual things to be better, because I considered the totality." "The totality" is history as it is seen by God from his timeless perch. It includes all the crimes that Egan contemplates in his book, but it fits them into a larger story in which the universe itself is made new at the end of time. Augustine's theory doesn't answer all questions about evil, and not everyone finds it consoling. But it isn't stupid.

Egan's meditations on historical themes, along with engrossing descriptions of ancient vineyards, alpine trails, and local cuisine, eventually give way to more intimate reflections. Egan is suffering more than just foot pain. His sister-in-law is dying of cancer. A friend who was a victim of an abusive Catholic priest committed suicide (the same priest abused untold numbers of people). On top of these sorrows, there is the normal parental anxiety over a young adult son and daughter, both of whom join Egan at different stages of his pilgrimage, as does his wife. In view of all these personal concerns, I can understand why Egan might have grown impatient with the heady abstractions of Augustine's theology.

Egan's epiphany—described in a section titled "Answers"—comes as a result not of theological argument, nor of meeting the pope, but of a gradual accumulation of experiences: a mystical encounter with the incorrupt corpse of St. Lucia Filippini; moving words from a priest in Switzerland; an Etruscan sarcophagus bearing husband and wife, which gives Egan "the small proof I need, another affirmation of the joyful defiance of linear time." This last event suggests that Egan's desire is close to Augustine's: our hearts are restless until they can somehow transcend linear time, in which all things pass away.

"You cross the finish line when you link your tenuous existence with the perpetual past," Egan writes. What is this past? Many of us know it, or think we know it, "by baptism, culture, and upbringing." Some of us don't know it at all. Regardless, as this beautiful book makes clear, if we wish to discover it, or rediscover it, we must go on pilgrimage.

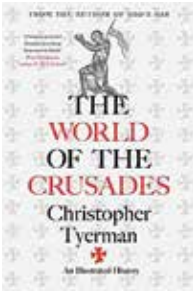
**SANTIAGO RAMOS** *is the John Garvey Writing Fellow at* Commonweal.

# Signed by the Cross

THOMAS F. X. NOBLE

Catholic schools used to—do they still?—nickname their athletic teams "Crusaders." Jefferson spoke of a "crusade against ignorance." Eisenhower called his World War II memoir *Crusade in Europe*. In recent decades we have had crusades against crime, drugs, and poverty, to name just a few targets. George W. Bush proclaimed a crusade against terror. The word generally had a positive valence. But now, among groups as diverse as ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Western progressives, the word is a slur. John Paul II even apologized for the Fourth Crusade (1215) that, instead of liberating Jerusalem, captured Constantinople. In recent years xenophobic crackpots of the so-called alt-right have embraced the crusades.

So what is a crusade, what were *the* crusades? In bare essentials, the crusades were a series of wars waged by European Christians against Muslims and pagans, and also against fellow Christians, in the Levant, of course, but also in Iberia, Italy, Southern France, the Balkans, Byzantium, and the Baltic. The so-called First Crusade—medieval people did not number the crusades; modern writers do—was preached in 1095 by Urban II, launched in 1096, and completed in 1099. The last crusade that met the technical requirements for crusading (see below) was launched by Pius II in 1463. Struggles against the Ottoman Turks down to the end of the seventeenth century bore some stamps of crusading. The crusades were, thus, the longest-lived phenomenon of the medieval Catholic world. It would be fair to guess that the crusades are one of the few things most people would mention if asked to say something about the Middle Ages.




**THE WORLD OF THE CRUSADES**
An Illustrated History

CHRISTOPHER TYERMAN
Yale University Press, $35, 520 pp.

David Aubert, *Conquest of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204*, 15th-century miniature

With the death in 2016 of the Cambridge scholar Jonathan Riley-Smith, Christopher Tyerman assumed, by merit not by default, leadership among the world's historians of the crusades. He is prolific. Readers of the book under review may wonder how it compares to his 2006 *God's War: A New History of the Crusades*, which tipped the scales at 1,024 pages. *The World of the Crusades* is only half as long but it retains many features of the longer study. Both are based on a sovereign command of both sources and scholarship, and both seem to be addressed to general audiences more than to fellow specialists. Tyerman never argues with other scholars in his text and rarely does so in his notes. *World* moves at a livelier clip than *God's War* and is more engagingly written. It is also festooned with features that will entertain and inform all readers: 161 images, almost all in color; seventeen maps; and thirty-nine essays of two to four pages called "The Crusades in Detail." These treat, to pick just a few examples, Women and the Crusades, Plunder and Booty, Castles in Outremer, Paying Crusaders, Food and Drink, The Sociology of Crusading: Who Went?, The Children's Crusade, and Medicine. Reading this book is as pleasurable as it is informative. I have been reading and teaching medieval history for fifty years. I wish I had cut my teeth on this book instead of Steven Runciman's *A History of the Crusades* (1951–54).

Three themes run all the way through this book (and inform *God's War* as well). The first is that the inception of the crusades drew upon a reservoir of enthusiasm for Holy War that persisted, now waxing, now waning,

for some seven centuries. That enthusiasm was, at its core, fundamentally religious. The second is that each crusade can best be understood when set into its economic, social, political, and ecclesiastical context. The third is that geography matters: cascading turbulence in Western and Southern Europe, the Middle East, and the Baltic must be understood if the crusades are to be understood. Themes two and three generate Tyerman's "world." A further difference between *God's War* and *World* is that the world is more central in the latter and war, in minute detail, more central in the former. Readers who want a blow-by-blow account of each crusading campaign will be happier with *God's War*.

Tyerman's approach is basically chronological but only the First and Third Crusades (1187) get their own chapters. All the other crusades are embedded in chapters dealing with the three themes enumerated above. The book defies any attempt at brief summation. Tyerman begins by warning against the binary of Christian vs. Muslim, an excessive focus on the Holy Land, a perception of civilizational strife, and any attempt to relate the crusades to modern Palestine. Christians waged war in God's name in Roman times, in the age of Charlemagne, and in tenth-century Germany. In the late eleventh century something new happened, or, perhaps more accurately, coalesced: what we call the crusades. A crusade proper was always marked by specific preaching, vows, taking the cross, and concrete benefits. These benefits were both religious (remission of the temporal punishment for sin and later of sin itself) and secular (suspension of debts and lawsuits, and financial privileges, for example). Crusaders were *crucesignati*, signed by the cross, but there was never a single name for them or for the movement in which they participated. Crusade never achieved a specific sacramental or juristic definition. "Crusade," in English and in other languages, is an eighteenth-century word.

*Every crusade was both more and less than a religious war. No one had a monopoly on brutality.*

A few of Tyerman's general points are worth attention. Every crusade reveals elements of extraordinary planning, organization, and execution, all of which are themselves revealing of the growing sophistication of medieval society and government. Crusades were fantastically expensive and, over time, generated inventive means of financing themselves. Crusaders were not holy solitaries. They had to fit into dense networks of political and familial relationships. They were lords or vassals, and maybe both. They had fathers, sons, wives, brothers, sisters, cousins, nephews. Any one crusader's vow could have an impact on a considerable number of people. Crusaders generally belonged to the political and social elite but crusades needed cooks, dog-handlers, farriers, grooms, stewards, notaries, laundresses, physicians, minstrels, and prostitutes. Crusading armies were motley crews. Most crusaders were paid; they were not romantic idealists. Every crusade was both more and less than a religious war. No one had a monopoly on brutality. No matter one's vantage point, any one crusade or the movement as a whole provides a privileged view of the medieval world.

Tyerman concludes by bringing the story down to our own times. He does this in two ways. Beginning with Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1580–81), which turned Godfrey of Boullon's First Crusade into a chivalric romance, Tyerman discusses writers such as Walter Scott, Edward Gibbon, Chateaubriand, various romantics, Nazis, Fascists, and some recent scholars, Marxists, pious Catholics, and secular historians; painters from Tintoretto to Delacroix; and composers from Monteverdi to Dvořák. His aim is to show how and why the crusades have been kept alive in modern memory. Second, he asks "Do the Crusades Matter?" That is a pretty good question for any historian to ask about his or her subject. He gives several answers, all in the affirmative. If historians in the past were primarily interested in politics, war, diplomacy, and "great men," then today they are much more interested in memory, memorialization, interfaith and cross-cultural relations, race, popular religion, identity, and gender. The student of the crusades can productively follow any of those threads. Whether one admires or despises the religious faith that impelled countless thousands of people over several centuries to go to war, the fundamental question of human motivation is on vivid display in the crusades. The modern political maps of Iberia and of the eastern Baltic make sense in light of the crusades. From 1495 to 1717 the Holy League—in a set of military campaigns that weren't *quite* crusades—fought and defeated the Ottomans. Venetian imperial and commercial opportunism is still on display in Istanbul and has complicated matters in the Adriatic, especially in Istria and Dalmatia, until now. In the end, the Lebanese Maronite Church, united with the papacy in 1181, is the only surviving remnant of the crusader states in the eastern Mediterranean. Georges Duby's famous quip that the sole contribution of the crusades to Europe was the apricot must be taken tongue-in-cheek.

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# Feathers

RACHEL STURGES

A few weeks after my four-year-old son's emergency appendectomy, I notice how often he collects feathers. Toby finds dirty white herring gull feathers on the shore of the Saint Lawrence River, red iridescent cardinal feathers in our backyard, and striped brown-and-white turkey feathers on his father's bookshelf. Feathers are a part of his play. He flaps them in the air and touches the tiny filaments with a finger and observes how they separate like hairs. He tapes a large feather to the handlebars of his bike; he says it will make him go faster.

After he goes to sleep, I empty his pockets of the detritus of the yard—bark, stones, a ring made from a twisted dandelion stem. With him so recently in mortal danger, I wonder if my husband and I have done enough to cultivate his spiritual life.

On the night he got sick, as my husband packed a bag to take to the emergency room, I lay beside Toby in his bed. The nightlight glowed a pinkish orange. Because he asked me to, I gently rubbed his hot, swollen belly; I sang a song about working in the garden. "Inch by inch, row by row, we're gonna make this garden grow." My voice rose and fell, turning a song about tilling land into a lullaby. We lay on top of the owl quilt his grandmother had sewn, his familiar room made strange by his pain and my fear.

To settle myself, I looked at the art my husband and I had hung on the walls during Toby's infancy. Above my head, a photograph of a loon on a lake. When we camp, we hear the loon's mournful calls but do not often see it. Next to the loon, a sketch of a red-bellied woodpecker on a trunk. We see it in the backyard pecking at the silver maple. On the wall near the foot of the bed, a reproduction of Audubon's painted finches fluttering on and off a tree branch. Their green-gold, burnt orange, red, and blue plumage is more fantastic than the feathers of the finches who stop at our birdfeeder. Our son's birds are not the mysterious birds of religion, not the dove aloft a few inches above Jesus' hand. As my fingers circled his belly, I prayed and I told him angels would protect him. I said I loved him. "You love me even when I'm bad," he reminded me. "Yes," I said.

When Toby was still in the hospital recovering from his surgery, I went into his room again. Sun shone through the open curtains onto the rumpled bed. While gathering books to take to the hospital, my hand pushed aside *Goodnight Moon* and *Stuart Little* to find a small image of a guardian angel, a gift of his other grandmother. I had forgotten about the memento. Her hands hover above a pair of children; her wings provide shelter as they step across a narrow bridge of broken boards and branches lashed together with rope. Water rushes below and behind them. As I remembered the night Toby fell ill, I looked at her luminescent feathers with such gratitude. I set her again on the shelf. She did not seem out of place in this room of birds.

Painted finches in *Birds of America*, John James Audubon

A few weeks later, Toby's scars are still healing. We sometimes try to talk about what happened, but don't get far. Over the next few days I sew pieces of fabric that I fold and fashion into feathers onto a t-shirt for him to wear in a play at his Catholic grammar school. He sings a song about Jonah in the belly of the whale while he builds with Legos. When I stitch by hand or run the fabric through the sewing machine, I think about angel wings, the dusky brown feathers of the phoebe building a nest on our porch. I think about what my son will say as he puts on the costume for the first time and touches the feathers I have sewn on his new owl's breast.

Before dinner, we go outside again, and my husband and Toby collect fallen branches. We see a caterpillar crawling on a stick. What we find outside are physical manifestations of the holy, representative of the sloughing off of old skin, the salt of blood and the sea, signs of the divine. In nature we see examples of the shedding of what is no longer needed. Our son looks closely at a tree where the branch fell, touches the crisp, healthy wood beneath.

RACHEL STURGES *is working on a collection of essays called* Backyard Studies. *She lives in Canton, New York, with her husband and two sons.*

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