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Elizabeth Johnson on Darwin

James Fredericks & Andrew Bacevich on Niebuhr

The Editors on the NSA

E. J. Dionne on Michael Ignatieff

Richard Alleva on *Philomena*

A poem by Michael Robbins

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Subscription Information
855-713-1792
subscriptions@commonwealmagazine.org

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

Publisher
Thomas Baker

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LETTERS

Passing on the faith, married priests

THE CHALLENGE OF INTERMARRIAGE

Regarding your "Raising Catholic Kids" symposium (December 6, 2013): I am a practicing Catholic father married to a non-Catholic. I am the child of a Catholic mother and a Jewish father. I have some knowledge of the results of surveys documenting very high rates (over 50 percent) of intermarriage among non-Orthodox U.S. Jews. There is a negative correlation between levels of observant activity (in Judaism and probably all religions) and rates of intermarriage—those most intensely interested in their faith are less likely to marry outside it.

Forty years ago, I married a Jewish woman. The ceremony had to be conducted on "neutral territory" by both a priest and a rabbi, under multiple dispensations. Partly because of my own experience, I'd hoped to educate my children as Catholics, but I underestimated both the strength of my wife's commitment to her faith and the depth of her hostility to most things Catholic. We ultimately agreed that the children would be sent to a Reform Jewish Sunday school—I would drop them off on my way to church and pick them up afterward. I naïvely hoped that they would thereby acquire a belief in "the God of the Book," and I would have opportunities to advance their religious education by eventually informing them of the good news of salvation. It did not work out.

I cannot speak about Reform Sunday school education generally, but the classes my kids attended walked a tightrope between the various religious theologies held by different portions of the congregation. As a result, according to what I could gather from my children, teaching focused on cultural issues—traditional practices at festival seasons and the like, with little or no emphasis either on the nature of man's relationship with God or the ethical constraints and requirements flowing from that relationship. As a result, when my two very intelligent children rebelled, I had no answer to their complaint that it all was very trivial. Perhaps if I had been committed to my wife's religion, I might have been able to provide an adequate response.

I am still married, and our now-married children are both physically and emotionally close to us. But we cannot discuss religious issues—it remains painful. One child married a Swede of (faint) Lutheran persuasion, and the other married the daughter of a Pentecostal minister. I would ask how they hope to answer the question of religious education, but I don't think they even see it as a question worth asking.

ANONYMOUS

A FAMILIAR TUNE

In its April 20, 1990, issue, *Commonweal* published an article of mine titled "Easter Bunnies & Xmas Trees: Who Will Pass on the Faith?" It expressed concerns similar to those covered in "Raising Catholic Kids."

Today, twenty-four years later, as the parent of two successful, ethical, and socially conscious thirty-year-olds, I share all the authors' concerns. Like their children, ours are not hostile to the church; they simply do not see its relevance to their lives. Since 1990, my own thinking has evolved. While the causes of our children's drift from Catholicism are many, I now believe that the transition to the

Coming in the February 7 issue:

Part two of our exclusive excerpt from Elizabeth A. Johnson's forthcoming book, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love.*

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THE LAST WORD

American melting-pot identity of our once Polish, Irish, French, Italian, etc. communities left behind the Catholic and the ethnic elements. The result is that the dominant worldview of our children is now a composite of the values, practices, and social, political, and cultural loyalties that form the identity of the wider American community. In other words, in our children's eyes, being an American hardly differs from being a Catholic. In proving ourselves to be good Americans, we have lost our Catholic identity, especially the depth of our traditions and beliefs.

In her contribution to your symposium, Eleanor Sauers looks for remedies in the teaching role of community—notably, the family, the parish, and informal groups of Catholics—which leads her to recognize their respective limitations. In looking for illumination on this matter, I have been struck by the tone and messages contained in Pope Francis's recent apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*. It calls for a more prophetic, missionary, and joyful church. I wait to see how its exhortations will echo in our pulpits. Either way, we cannot let the richness of our faith be buried in American life and especially partisan politics.

J. PAUL MARTIN
New York, N.Y.

AFTER CELIBACY

Regarding Richard Gaillardetz's article "Married Priests" (December 6, 2013): When I "left" the priesthood to marry twenty years ago, I wrote to the bishop that I was not "resigning from" a ministry that I felt called to and immensely enjoyed so much as I was "resigning to" the fact that the church would not use me in a married state.

Over two decades of marriage I've served as a hospice chaplain in mental health, an officiant at weddings, an educator, and a regular homilist in both Catholic and Protestant congregations. I realize how free I now am to celebrate the many ministries I love. Yet I am given the humbling daily challenges of intimacy and vulnerability that come with marriage and parenthood—these are much less accessible to those who serve in the canonical priesthood.

Yet my decision did not come without regret. I have come to appreciate the freedom to take risks the celibate priesthood provides—risks a husband and father must consider more carefully. If I were celibate, I would not need to worry as much about time commitments, financial constraints, and taking more radical stands for the sake of justice.

I am grateful for the different chapters of my life, and do not glibly call for a married clergy, but I do hope that the clerical caste system that has only intensified will become a smashed idol, even as I admire many old friends and colleagues who are "celibate for the sake of the kingdom"—some by calling, some by chosen bachelorhood, some coercively by canon law, but each trying his best to be loving. So I do hope for the gift of a married clergy that will be seen as holy and of its own special value, but only if women are recognized as as "priests/presbyters" too.

DAVID PASINKSI
Fayetteville, N.Y.

STRONG 'CAPTAIN'

I wanted to offer praise for Richard Alleva's review of *Captain Phillips*, "All At Sea" (December 20, 2013), and echo his praise for the film itself. I agree that a more appropriate title for the movie would have been *Captain Phillips and Captain Muse*. This theme is pressed early in the scene where protagonist and antagonist see one another through binoculars, and recognize each as a worthy adversary. The real accomplishment of the film is that the Somali pirates become full characters with real motivations, families, and pressures.

I was surprised to find myself feeling sympathy for the leader of the pirates, Abduwali Muse, and the difficulties of his life. In a brilliant turn, Muse and Phillips move from opposing one another to being caught in a game no one can win. In that sense, both men become antiheroes, caught up in a complex and evil reality, which leads them to a desperate situation. The characters' shift from opposition to entanglement is accomplished by a sophisticated plot and superb acting.

ERIK LENHART, OFM
Jamaica Plain, Mass.

From the Editors

Reforming the NSA

Many Americans were disturbed, and rightly so, by the extent of domestic electronic surveillance conducted by the National Security Agency as revealed in the classified material leaked by Edward Snowden. In spite of judicial and congressional oversight of the NSA's activities, the potential for abuse is great. To some extent, that danger is inherent in any clandestine government operation, but it is heightened by the way in which our private, work, and civic lives are increasingly being conducted electronically. Given that fact, it is even more important that transparency and accountability be built into the government's antiterrorism efforts, with firmer safeguards against unwarranted snooping. Few dispute the value of the NSA's capabilities in tracking the communications of groups who see themselves to be at war with the United States. Yet a better balance must be struck between privacy rights and the government's efforts to protect national security. No government can function without a measure of trust from its citizens; at the same time, it is the duty of every citizen to demand as full an accounting of the government's activities as possible.

Last month the Presidential Review Group on Intelligence and Communications Technologies released its recommendations for reforming the NSA's electronic data collection. President Obama has promised to respond to the report within the next few weeks. The president appears likely to adopt many of the commission's recommendations, as he should. Congress will also be asked to reform aspects of the Patriot and Foreign Intelligence Surveillance acts. It should. The three-hundred-page report does not call for wholesale changes at the NSA, but it does urge that steps be taken to limit the unsupervised reach of the NSA's operations and that the decisions of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court supervising the agency be made public.

The NSA program that has garnered most of the headlines and provoked the greatest concern is its collection of "telephony metadata"—that is, the records of virtually all the phone numbers and email addresses used by Americans. The content of phone conversations or emails cannot be accessed without approval of the FISA court. Those proceedings, however, remain secret. Currently, the NSA compels phone and internet companies to provide the metadata and keeps it for five years. According to the NSA, this bulk data collection can be combed through to reveal communication patterns and thus possible terrorist threats. However, the NSA was able to document only a few instances in which it actually searched these databases. Consequently, the review group recommends that this information remain in the hands of the private vendors, or a third party, and be accessed only by court order. NSA officials are concerned that this will hamper possible future investigations, but the tradeoff in greater public trust may be worth any delays involved.

The review group also urges that law enforcement agencies that work closely with the NSA, such as the FBI, get a FISA judge's order when demanding customer information from private companies. Under current law, the agencies can simply compel compliance by issuing a "National Security Letter" on their own (a "gag order" on the companies comes with the letter). Fifteen thousand such letters were issued in 2012. Judicial oversight of each investigation would be cumbersome, but some step toward greater accountability needs to be taken.

Especially promising is the proposal that a civil-liberties advocate be added to the FISA court to make sure Fourth Amendment privacy concerns are given due consideration. The review group also suggests that the now confidential rulings of the FISA courts be made public whenever possible, a change long overdue and essential to restoring public trust. Finally, all FISA judges are now appointed by the chief justice of the Supreme Court. To ensure greater ideological diversity, the panel wants more than one Supreme Court justice to select the judges.

Despite his campaign promises, President Barack Obama has rarely shown the courage of his convictions in fully informing the American people about the government's antiterrorism initiatives. The executive branch will inevitably want as much control of the nation's security apparatus as possible, and Congress is loath to appear "soft" on defense issues. But the reforms outlined above would still be important steps toward guarding against abuse and restoring public confidence in the integrity of the NSA. In a dangerous world, the United States is not about to abandon electronic surveillance abroad, which is the NSA's mandate. But national security means little if the methods used to keep the nation safe betray the fundamental democratic principles for which it stands. This was too often the case in the first, panicked response to the 9/11 attacks. Happily, a greater sense of political and moral equilibrium now prevails, and with it, one hopes, the confidence not to give up all privacy and liberty in the hopeless pursuit of perfect security. ■

January 7, 2014

Jo McGowan

Moving Day

SENDING DAD FROM HOME TO A HOME

There's nothing easy about watching one's father drift out of his own life. Alzheimer's, old age, senility—whatever you call it—it's painful and distressing for everyone.

Since my mother passed away five years ago, my father has lived with one or another of his daughters and their families. Most of the time he was with my sister Mary and her husband, Tom, in New Hampshire, but he also spent a year with us here in India. As he got older and his memory became more impaired, it grew increasingly difficult to care for him. He was frequently incontinent (the number-one reason the elderly are placed in nursing homes) and often belligerent, and could no longer be left alone even for short periods. When we made the decision to move my father into an assisted-living center, I think we all felt sad, disappointed with ourselves, and guilty. My parents had taken people in all their lives. We grew up with three of our grandparents living with us and an almost endless parade of strays—an elderly man whose house had burned down; a pregnant teen; a suicidal young woman; a friend of Mom's who had no other family to live with when she grew too old to care for herself. We saw our parents make room for everyone, and yet here we were sending Dad off.

The day I got my sister's e-mail that a place had opened for Dad at the assisted-living center we had chosen, I lost it. My father in a nursing home? No! I had an appointment that morning to which I had to drive, and I remember gunning the motor so hard I shocked even myself. I drove out of the driveway and then idled in the street, uncertain of where I was going or what I had meant to do. My husband came out, concerned. "Go home," he said. "You need to see him."

So I decided to return to the United States to be with Dad during the transition, hoping that this might make it easier for him, my siblings and—perhaps most of all—myself. Amazingly, that's exactly what happened. I went half expecting all my worst fears to be confirmed, to come away feeling even more guilty, more implicated. But when I arrived at the assisted-living center, Dad looked better to me than he had in a long time. At home, he would go for several days without a shower, saying he was too tired or didn't really need one. At the center, his regular routine included a bath every day—and he looked fit and charming as a result. Like so many of us, he makes a special effort for outsiders. At home, he was prone to pouting, resentment, and childish outbursts. In the center, he is friendly, even flirtatious. The staff all love him; the other residents want to be his friend. And the things that made life difficult at home—the yanking out of his catheter so that he would drip urine all over the house, the tantrums, the incontinence—didn't seem to be happening at the center.

But for me, the most important proof that we had made the right decision came on my last day in America. As I went in to visit him for the last time before my return, I reminded him I was going home. "You know I'm going back home today, right, Dad?"

"Oh yes," he said. "You're going back to India." A pause while I took in the fact that he remembered where I lived. "I don't want you to feel in any way upset about leaving me. They are all very kind to me here. They bring me my meals; they take very good care of me."

"Oh, Daddy!" I said. "Are you happy here, then?"

He smiled. "Happy? Well, I'd rather have you around all the time." He paused, thoughtfully. "But I know you should be in India. I know what wonderful work you are doing there. I know that's where you are meant to be. And I don't want you regretting your decisions even for one moment. I'm very proud of you."

For one sweet moment my father's mind was clear and unimpeded. He gave me his blessing. Then, just as quickly, the veil came down again. As I said goodbye, it was clear to me that for him, I had already left. And yet, as I stood in his doorway gazing at him, hoping against hope for one last sign of recognition, he looked up, as if to say: "What are you waiting for? Get on with it now! You've got work to do!" I returned to India knowing he was well cared for, and believing he understood why I live where I do.

These stories don't always end so neatly. I'm lucky. My father still has enough of a grip on reality that he can separate his own needs and insecurities from mine. We bring up our children hoping they will make a difference in the world and then we step back to allow them to do just that. Not easy. But it's what we sign up for when we have them. ■

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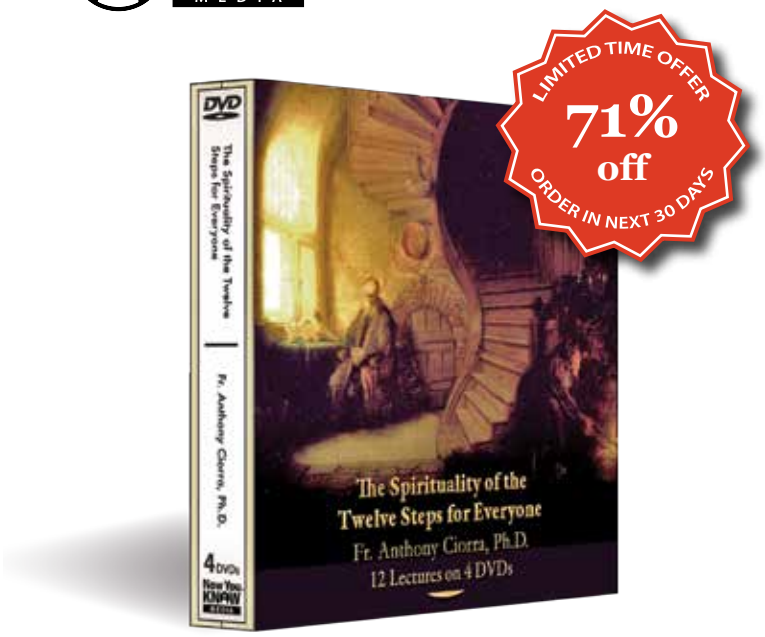

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Margaret O'Brien Steinfels

Blank Checks

THE PERIL OF LETTING AN ALLY DETERMINE OUR FOREIGN POLICY

No competent adult would write a blank check allowing the recipient to fill in the amount. Blank checks in the affairs of nations are another matter. On July 5, 1914, German Kaiser Wilhelm II issued such a check to his ally Austria and gave the world a metaphor that sums up the surrender of one nation to the caprices of another. That blank check was issued to an envoy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire who had come to Berlin after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand to inform the Kaiser that an unspecified ultimatum would be delivered to the Serbian government. What if Germany had read the ultimatum before Austria sent it? What if Tsar Nicholas II of Russia had restrained Serbia's rejection of the ultimatum and negotiated with Austria? What if he, too, had not issued a blank check to his ally?

As the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of World War I approaches, these what-ifs plague efforts to understand how war could have broken out when most European leaders and thinkers thought war unnecessary and unlikely. The English saw the assassination as one more skirmish in the long-running Balkan imbroglio. European nobility regarded the archduke's anniversary visit to Sarajevo with his commoner wife as a vanity tour. Neither the French nor the English military were prepared for war, nor, as it turned out, were the Russian or Austrian armies. The short war that everyone anticipated dragged on for four dreadful years.

Would Kaiser Wilhelm have issued his blank check had he foreseen the consequences? He had an impulsive and paranoid character, seeing enemies on every border. Tsar Nicholas, cautious and weak-willed, had a fatalistic attitude, fearing war would end his regime. Neither emperor had significant curbs placed on their decisions, which were often made on the spur of the moment. Nor, expecting that war would be over in weeks, did either ruler have a strategy for the military stalemate they were plunging into. Austria and Serbia cashed their blank checks and World War I began.

Historians totting up the causes of the war are still puzzled by such reckless decisions, which resulted in the deaths of more than 16 million soldiers and civilians, brought down the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman Empires, and rippled disastrously through the twentieth century. All for a dead archduke?

In spite of the dramatic historical lesson, blank checks remain the currency of allied nations. During the twentieth century, seemingly competent leaders—most with far more restraints on their decision-making powers than the Kaiser or Tsar—went on issuing blank checks. Most recently, President George W. Bush gave the postinvasion government of Iraq a blank check and was prepared to stand by indefinitely while it got its house in order; it never did. President Barack Obama finally canceled the check. The United States stands in supplication behind the teller's window as Obama tries to cancel the U.S. check held by Afghan President Hamid Karzai. For the past twenty years, the United States has given Israel a blank check in its occupation of the West Bank and attacks on Lebanon and Gaza. More recently, it appears that Israel's threat to attack Iran has been backed by the full faith and credit of the United States.

PETE SOUZA

In November, Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry opened negotiations to ratchet down Iran's nuclear program. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reacted as if a hold had been put on Israel's check. In December, twenty-six U.S. senators, including several Democrats, introduced the "Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act of 2013," calling for ever more sanctions on Iran and requiring that it surrender all of its nuclear facilities and materials. The senators are clearly willing to derail negotiations, and while they were at it, they included this provision in the bill: "If the government of Israel is compelled to take military action in legitimate self-defense against Iran's nuclear weapon program, the United States government should stand with Israel and provide, in accordance with the law of the United States and the constitutional responsibility of Congress to authorize the use of military force, diplomatic, military, and economic support to the government of Israel in its defense of its territory, people, and existence."

Read that carefully, as Netanyahu and company assuredly do. Would they be mistaken in concluding that they can fill in the blank whenever they choose, whatever the amount—and the United States will pay? True, Israel faces threats from Iran and other neighbors, but a blank check from the United States will not help Israel and the greater cause of peace any more than the blank checks of 1914 served those who issued or received them. ■

Darwin's Tree of Life

The Grandeur of a View that Changed the World

Elizabeth A. Johnson

"Ask the beasts and they will teach you," we read in Job (12:7). My new book takes its title from that verse, placing the natural world as envisioned by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution in conversation with Christian belief in a loving God who creates, redeems, and promises a blessed future for our world. When we ask the animals and plants about their origin and relationship with God, a picture emerges of how they are cherished by divine love prior to, and apart from, the emergence of humanity. The evolution of the human species introduces sin into the world, seen today in our destruction of habitats and the resulting extinction of species. In this context, listening to the beasts fosters a deep ecological ethic as humans aim to replace their domination over nature with mutual regard and responsible care in the community of creation. The goal of this dialogue is to discover how love of the natural world is an intrinsic part of believers' passion for the living God—to practical and critical effect. In this essay, the first of a two-part series, I hope to make clear how Darwin's work changed our understanding of nature and humankind's place in creation. Then, in the second essay, to be published in the next issue, I will explore what the Darwinian revolution means for Christian theology.

Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* is surely one of the most cited and least understood books of all time. Contrary to what many presume, it does not recount the story of life's beginnings on earth. Nor does it trace the sequence of life from its earliest forms to the higher mammals. In fact, it's not a story of origins at all. Rather, the book is "one long argument," as Darwin put it, crafted to show that there is such a story to begin with. *Origin* makes the case that over millions of years, species of plants and animals have evolved from original parents, diversifying, dying, and generating new forms of life, according to the workings of natural selection.

Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ, *is Distinguished Professor of Theology at Fordham University.* *This essay has been adapted from her book* Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love, *which will be published by Bloomsbury in March. Funding for this essay has been provided by a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation.*

Darwin begins his presentation like a good teacher, appealing to what readers already know. Chapter 1 describes the familiar practice of breeding—choosing animals and plants with desirable traits and mating them in the hope of reproducing and strengthening those features—and focuses on pigeon breeding, a popular British hobby. Darwin himself kept a flock of up to ninety birds, and in a dazzling nine-page riff on their variations, he carefully compares the "wonderful differences" found among his many breeds. Virtually every anatomical detail differs, from their beaks and nostrils, to the shape and size of their eggs, to their manner of flight and the sound of their voices. Most breeders believed that each type of pigeon descended from its own particular ancestor, so that current stock mirrored a preexisting range of original wild stock. But Darwin argued that since crossbred pigeons produce fertile offspring, they all descend from the same aboriginal form, despite their distinctive looks. If a wide variety of pigeons could descend from one species as a result of domestic breeding, he asked, why couldn't that be the case for the rest of the planet's plants and animals?

Darwin was well aware that he was covering new ground. "The laws governing inheritance are quite unknown," he wrote. Yet he reasoned that since we can breed animals to produce characteristics we desire, species must not be set in stone, but rather must be capable of departing from the parent type. Selective breeding reveals "the great effect produced by the accumulation in one direction, during successive generations, of differences absolutely inappreciable by the uneducated eye."

This set the stage for the next step in his argument, which uses the human selection of domesticated species as an analogy for similar selective processes in nature—processes driven by a "principle":

> I have called this principle, by which each slight variation, if useful, is preserved, by the term of Natural Selection, in order to mark its relation to man's power of selection. We have seen that man by selection can certainly produce great results, and can adapt organic beings to his own uses, through the accumulation of slight but useful variations.... But Natural Selection, as we shall hereafter see, is a power incessantly ready for action, and is as immeasurably superior to man's feeble efforts, as the works of Nature are to those of Art.

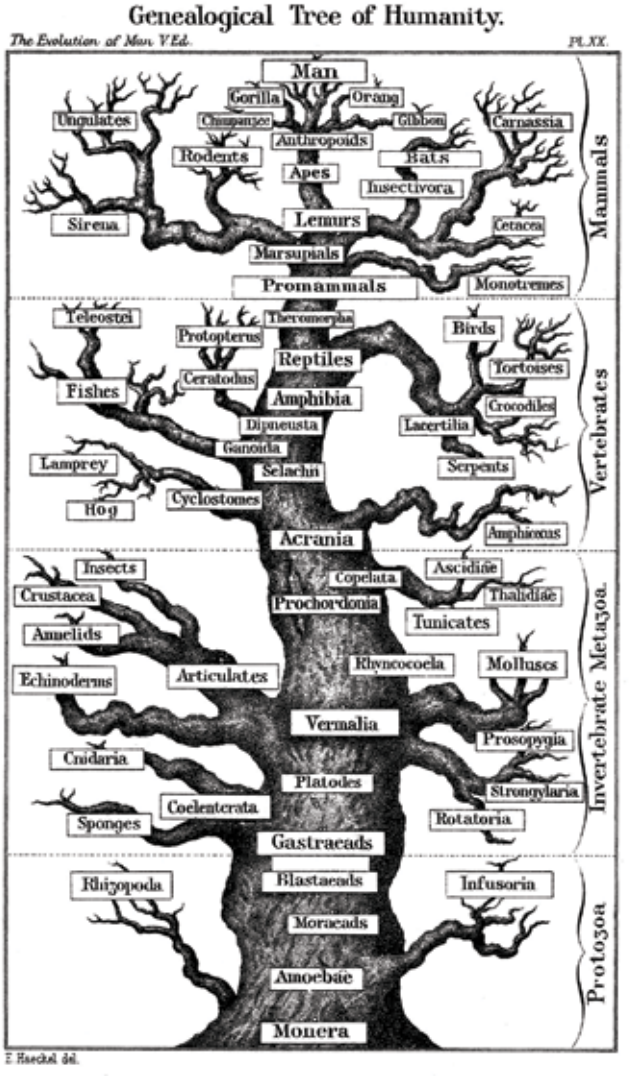
Prevailing ideas held that each species was the product of an act of "special creation" and as such remained stable over time. In the eighteenth century, the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus had devised a system of classifying plants and animals (with significant revisions, it is still used today) which assigned all natural things to one of three kingdoms: animal, vegetable, or mineral. He then divided kingdoms into classes, classes into orders (such as *Lepidoptera* for moths and butterflies), and orders into families. From these flow genera—such as *Canis*, for dog—which then split into species, such as *Canis lupus*, the wolf, and from there into subspecies (for animals) and varieties (for plants). For Linnaeus, classification revealed the plan of creation. As he put it, "God created, Linnaeus arranged."

But Darwin's emphasis on variation challenged the neatness of Linnaeus's system. He stressed the importance of slight differences, intermediary forms, and weak variations that seemed to grow stronger over time. For instance, nearly two hundred British plants considered varieties by some botanists were deemed individual species by others. Part of the problem, Darwin argued, lay in the idea that species are immutable. A different idea—that of an evolving relationship among organisms—offered a very different approach to classification. Instead of being seen as a collection of separate entities, forms of life could be divided into groups that gradually emerged from other groups. Natural selection, Darwin suggested, works in an incremental and cumulative fashion, so that changes amplify over time and new species are born.

But now a question arose. In breeding domesticated species, humans select properties they want to perpetuate. Given that nature does not act in a similarly purposeful fashion, what exactly governs the selection?

To answer this question, in Chapter 3—titled "Struggle for Existence"—Darwin delved into the circumstances in which selection occurs. Here we see the influence of Thomas Robert Malthus's 1798 work, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, which held that the tendency of human populations to grow faster than their ability to produce food would inevitably create clashes over sustenance. Darwin found this theory useful for his own ideas about the natural world. In every species more individuals are born than can possibly survive. In fact, without some destruction of life, there would be no room left. In this circumstance, nature applies a system of checks and balances. Thus we see species eating but also serving as prey; spreading out but being driven back; fighting off or succumbing to disease; surviving or dying in severe weather events; waging battle or setting up novel forms of cooperation.

"I use the term Struggle for Existence in a large and metaphorical sense," Darwin wrote, "including dependence of one being on another, and including (which is more important) not only the life of the individual, but success in leaving progeny." From the outset he insisted that the idea of a struggle included not just competition with others, but also mutual dependence or cooperation. "Owing to this struggle for life," he wrote, "any variation, however slight and from whatever cause proceeding, if it be in any degree profitable to an individual of any species, in its infinitely complex relations to other organic beings and to external nature, will tend to the preservation of that individual, and will generally be inherited by its offspring."



It is worth recalling that to an audience steeped in natural theology's worldview, nature was largely a harmonious place, operating according to God's plan. Few paid heed to the real state of nature, in which survival is not assured. Darwin offered a corrective view:

> We behold the face of nature bright with gladness, we often see superabundance of food; we do not see, or we forget, that the birds which are idly singing around us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life; or we forget how largely these songsters, or their eggs, or their nestlings, are destroyed by birds and beasts of prey; we do not always bear in mind that though food may be now superabundant, it is not so at all seasons of each recurring year.

This is a deeply ecological vision of nature, entailing a network of intricate interdependencies expressed both in competition and cooperation. Over time, each being's structure becomes related, in an essential yet often hidden manner, to that of all other organic beings with which it competes for food, or on which it preys, or from which it has to escape, or with which it cooperates. Think of the teeth and talons of the tiger, or the hook of the parasite that clings to the tiger's fur. Every variation that gives its owner an advantage in the struggle for existence stands in close relationship with the land, climate, and other creatures. As these variations are inherited and accumulate, they slowly adapt each form to its environment.

Is this process haphazard? When we look at a beautiful riverbank, Darwin acknowledged, we might be tempted to impute its pleasing proportions, its numbers and kinds of species, to chance. He then rejected this idea: "How false a view this is!" The world's beauty arises from the mutual interactions of species in the struggle for life. Natural selection acts not only on visible characteristics, as human breeders do, but "on every organ, every shade of constitutional difference, on the whole machinery of life," singling out advantage or disadvantage in the struggle for life. And so organisms are ever more beautifully adapted to their situations. Leaf-eating insects are green, bark-feeders mottled grey, the alpine ptarmigan white in winter, and the black grouse the color of peaty earth. Under the pressure of selection, small advantageous differences—caused by chance mutations—steadily increase, resulting in breeds that ultimately differ in character from one another and from their common parent. Over whole geological periods and thousands of generations, the result is the origin of new species and interacting communities, connected by complex mutual relations.

Two principles amplify the outcome of natural selection, acting like its right and left hands: divergence and extinction. Divergence is premised on the idea that more life can flourish in a given area if it is occupied by organisms that draw from the same resources in different ways. If a region is filled to capacity with a species of carnivorous quadruped, for example, its numerous descendants will thrive only if they diverge to feed on new kinds of prey, climb trees, take to the water, or become less carnivorous. As selected and favored forms increase in number, meanwhile, filling niches and consuming resources, so will the less favored forms decrease and become rare. Ancestor species and transitional forms in particular are likely to diminish in number as their better-adapted progeny multiply. Many once-thriving species are now extinct while better-adapted ones have taken their place. Extinction is inevitable, Darwin insisted, "for the number of places in the polity of nature is not indefinitely great." Divergence drives lineages apart, and extinction erases evidence of the transition.

In face of the dominant paradigm, Darwin's theory of evolution argued that the true basis of classification is genealogical. A community of descent is the hidden bond that ties together all living beings. Darwin's theory reveals the inner affinity of all organic beings to one another—an affinity he fashioned, finally, into the metaphor of the great tree of life. Picture a spreading evolutionary tree that links nature and history into an indivisible whole, spanning the ages. The outer layer of budding twigs and green leaves represents the multitudes of species alive today. Branching out from the trunk are the major limbs, representing previous periods of growth of the main groups of organisms; these were themselves once budding twigs when the tree was small. They fork into smaller limbs that divide into lesser and lesser branches, signifying the splitting into multiple descendant species. Lower down are dead branches, standing for extinct ancestral forms. Only two or three twigs that flourished when the tree was a mere bush may have survived as long shoots. Many a limb has decayed and dropped off, representing whole families of organisms known to us only from the fossil record. Over millions of generations, all living beings are connected in this great tree:

Darwin argued that the true basis of classification is genealogical. A community of descent is the hidden bond that ties together all living beings.

> As buds give rise by growth to fresh buds, and these, if vigorous, branch out and overtop on all sides many a feebler branch, so by generation I believe it has been with the great Tree of Life, which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever branching and beautiful ramifications.

This is an audacious account of the origin of species. In it, all organic beings, living and dead, are related to one another, historically and biologically; all take their place in a single narrative of creative struggle, divergence, thriving, death, extinction, and further breakthrough. Since natural selection can act only by the preservation and accumulation of infinitesimally small modifications, Darwin envisioned it as a slow, intermittent process. Beneficial variations, at first barely appreciable, steadily increase, and new breeds emerge that trend away in character both from one another and from their common parent. The process may be slow, but it is powerful. Now expand this pattern of repeated forking

and branching, adaptation and extinction, to every creature alive at the same time, all interacting under the pressure of selection in the struggle for existence. It boggles the mind.

Researchers today estimate that a complete inventory of all species that have ever lived would number in the billions. Most are altogether absent from the fossil record—and most of those that *were* recorded have become extinct. What does it mean that death and extinction are so much a part of the story of life? Grounded on the belief that each new variety, and ultimately each new species, is produced by having some advantage in the struggle for life, Darwin's theory holds that the extinction of less-favored forms almost always follows. When a new, slightly improved variety of short-horn cattle was raised in England, it first supplanted the older varieties in the same neighborhood; eventually it took the place of other breeds in other countries. So too with nature, where the appearance of new forms and the disappearance of old forms are bound together. Time and again *Origin* emphasizes that extinction is integral to the process of evolution.

In contrast, the further back in time we go, the closer species approach one another in structure and function. By tracking the history of life back into deep time, *Origin* demonstrates the strength of the argument that all forms of life unfurl through the eons as one grand natural system, linked by generation. All the great facts of geology and paleontology plainly reveal the theory of natural selection to be a better explanation of the history of life than special creation's common view of the immutability of species. If species are immutable, fossils would not necessarily show gradations of structure over time and in close proximity, as they do. If species arose via special creation, then the same species should be able to reappear again and again to occupy similar niches throughout history, but they do not.

The age of European exploration helped naturalists accumulate knowledge of the earth's flora and fauna. By the time *Origin* was published, the study of biogeography was an emergent science. The new worlds were stocked with strikingly unfamiliar plants and animals. Leading naturalists of the day interpreted the growing data as more evidence of the Creator's design. As discoveries increased, they speculated on the number and locale of important "centers of creation" around the globe. Yet Darwin argued that natural selection offers a more plausible explanation of the distribution of life forms over the planet: species originate in one place from a common parent, then migrate and diverge, unless stopped by an impassable barrier. Over vast geological eras accompanied by large climate and land changes, similar species that now inhabit the most distant quarters of the world originally proceeded from the same source population.

Today's best-known example, which Darwin did not use, is the different species of finches whose beaks evolved on the various Galápagos Islands. A multi-year study by Peter and Rosemary Grant documented how finch beaks differ from short, narrow, and shallow to long, wide, and deep, the differences correlating with the birds' ability to harvest different types of seeds. In 1977, a severe drought visited the Galapagos Islands. Food supplies diminished so dramatically that finches hatched no eggs that year, and just 15 percent of them survived to see the next rain. The survivors had longer, wider, deeper beaks, allowing them to break open the tougher seeds. When they finally mated, their offspring had similar beaks. Six years later, rain water was plentiful, grass grew over the islands, and softer seeds abounded, allowing finches with shorter, shallower beaks to feed well and produce offspring. As the biologist David Reznick observes in his guide to *Origin*, this study shows that there is no best bird. There are only birds best suited to the conditions they inhabit.

That the theory of natural selection provided a better explanation than did special creation for the reality of life around us was supremely difficult for people of Darwin's time to accept. "Nothing at first can appear more difficult than to believe that the more complex organs and instincts should have been perfected not by means superior to…human reason," Darwin admitted, "but by the accumulation of innumerable slight variations, each good for the individual possessor." This is partly why many of the eminent naturalists and geologists of his time rejected natural selection. Yet Darwin was adamant about the worth of his theory. He wasn't demeaning creation. To the contrary, he confessed, "When I view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Silurian system was deposited, they seem to me to become ennobled."

Even if Darwin could not convince his contemporaries, he held out hope that a new generation would embrace his theory. Once people saw that organisms have a *history*, he thought—when we finally understood that all living beings are related—the light would dawn, and there would follow a thrilling revolution in natural history. His theory itself is a bearer of hope. The final paragraph of *On the Origin of Species* invites us to ponder the multifarious reality of life and "to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us." Darwin then offers this ringing conclusion:

> There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

And with that he brings his groundbreaking work to a close—not on a note of God-forsaking cynicism, not with a shrug, but with a tribute to cosmic beauty and wonder. It is a sentence whose eloquence has not been eroded by the tides of time. ■

American Innocence

Niebuhr & the Ironies of History: An Exchange

James L. Fredericks

Andrew Bacevich, a regular and perceptive contributor to *Commonweal*, has called Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History* "the most important book ever written on U.S. foreign policy." I suspect he is right. The works of George Kennan, Averell Harriman, John Foster Dulles, Henry Kissinger, and George Shultz certainly hold political and historical interest, and I'm guessing that the writings of former Secretaries of State Madeleine Albright and Colin Powell will also continue to earn the attention of scholars—at least for a while. But while most works of former foreign-policy heavyweights diminish in significance over time, *The Irony of American History* remains as important today as it was when published in 1952. To the extent that Niebuhr's book addresses the urgent moral conundrums of the Cold War, especially the nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union, it is dated. Yet *The Irony of American History* also looks at the conduct of U.S. foreign policy from a theological and historical perspective, one that takes human fallibility and its social consequences as inescapable realities. Events today continue to show that we ignore these realities at great risk—especially when thinking about the relations between nations.

"All men," Niebuhr wrote in *Irony*, "are naturally inclined to obscure the morally ambiguous element in their political cause by investing it with religious sanctity." In this regard, his work shines a klieg light on the past decade's so-called war on terror and the current debate over the operations of our "national security state." Beginning in the months after 9/11, President George W. Bush used religious and apocalyptic images to frame the U.S. response to Al Qaeda's devastating attacks. Subsequently, high officials at the CIA, at the Department of Defense, and in the vice president's office oversaw decidedly ungodly programs of "coercive interrogation" at Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, and "black sites" around the globe. Bush's successor, Barack Obama, has vigorously prosecuted the war against Al Qaeda even while ending U.S. military engagement in Iraq and winding down the war in Afghanistan. These seeming paradoxes make Obama an ironic figure of the kind that interested Niebuhr most—the self-conscious, existential irony of a man who knows he must act in history while being unable either to control the outcome or to escape the moral ambiguity of his choices.

Niebuhr was very much a man of his turbulent century. Born into a Midwestern Evangelical Lutheran household in 1892, just in time to be swept up into the political idealism of the Progressive Era, he served as a young pastor in Detroit, preaching a fiery Social Gospel and practicing pacifist ethics. He took courageous public stances against the Klan and championed the cause of auto workers. In 1928, he moved to New York to take a teaching position at Union Theological Seminary and joined the Socialist Party of America. A trip to Germany shook him out of his dogmatic pacifism. Witnessing the rise of European fascism, he began to argue that resistance to evil sometimes requires military force. In 1932 he published *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, arguing against the naïve idealism of liberal Protestants and American progressives (including John Dewey). *Moral Man* would come to be seen as a prescient warning about Nazi ideology and an ethical argument for U.S. intervention in the European conflict, but Niebuhr's views led to heated debates with liberal and often isolationist thinkers, including those writing for the *Christian Century*, the leading journal of mainline Protestantism.

After the war and the demise of the Soviet-American alliance, Niebuhr criticized liberals who downplayed or ignored revelations about Soviet gulags and show trials. To the irritation of the right, however, he also repudiated the moral dualism that would neatly separate the evils of the Soviet regime from the virtues of American democracy. The red-baiting investigations of the House Un-American Activities Committee were not as different from Stalin's show trials as many Americans wanted to think, Niebuhr cautioned. Moreover, there was no escaping the great moral irony of the Cold War: that in order to protect the world and preserve democracy, Americans had built weapons of mass destruction whose use would devastate life on the planet. *The Irony of American History* wrestled with these paradoxes in an honest and persuasive fashion, helping Niebuhr form alliances with like-minded liberals. With Arthur Schlesinger, Eleanor Roosevelt, Walter Reuther, and others, he founded Americans for Democratic Action to provide an alternative to both the naïve idealism of the left and the bellicose chest-thumping (and, later, witch-hunting) of the right. In the 1960s, he emerged as an out-

spoken opponent of America's misadventure in Vietnam. By the time of his death in 1971, Niebuhr had managed to alienate lots of old friends and allies.

Niebuhr's critique of democratic politics was built on three observations about human nature. The first was that we habitually justify our political institutions by cloaking them in an aura of sanctity. In this regard, he was a persistent critic of American exceptionalism, the profoundly Protestant notion that America has been singled out by God as a uniquely virtuous nation. Second, he held that despite the illusions of control and destiny political ideologies foster, history is intractable, its course and direction ultimately beyond human comprehension. Finally, Niebuhr argued that American history offers little evidence for either a triumphalist or a tragic interpretation, but rather is fundamentally ironic in nature.

Exceptionalism has been a powerful force in American history, from the first preachers of Plymouth Colony and the gentlemen deists of Virginia all the way to George W. Bush and his pledge to spread democracy throughout the world. To the amusement of some and the chagrin of others, Americans have persistently imagined themselves as a special people chosen by God to make a new beginning for mankind. We like to think that our values are beyond question and our motives pure. Niebuhr described this attitude as "the myth of American innocence," noting that Americans are often baffled and offended when others think badly of them, and generally insist that "our society is so essentially virtuous that only malice could prompt criticism of any of our actions." These "pretensions of innocency" are associated with what Niebuhr called the "deep layer of messianic consciousness" that underlies U.S. foreign policy. Americans have often believed that God has summoned the nation to a special mission in the world.

Niebuhr turns to Augustine to dismantle these messianic pretensions. The sack of Rome forced Augustine to recognize that the Roman Empire was, in fact, not essential to God's redemptive plan, and that the meaning and direction of history lie beyond even mankind's most impressive achievements. At the height of the Cold War, Niebuhr provocatively argued that we cannot know whether the great river of history flows "inevitably" toward capitalism or collectivism. Both ideologies, he pointed out, pretend to have captured the ultimate meaning of history, promising that we can become masters of our own destiny. Yet Christian faith calls us to look on all political ideologies and their seductive simplifications with skepticism. Human beings lack the humility to accept the fact that "the whole drama of history is enacted in a frame of meaning too large for human comprehension or management," Niebuhr wrote. American exceptionalism, with its "pretensions of innocency" and its messianic ambitions, is deeply entangled in this human need for an ideology of history.

The illusions Americans cherish about the direction of history and the possibility of managing it make American history ironic. This is Niebuhr's third great insight, and the one that helps us interpret the presidencies of Bush and Obama. Niebuhr uses "irony" in its dramatic sense. Irony in drama happens when the audience understands more about what a character on stage is saying or doing than the character does. Where tragedy brings us to tears for the greatness of the hero, irony brings out a laugh, and then a moment of comprehension, for "irony involves comic absurdities which cease to be altogether absurd when fully understood." Cervantes makes us laugh at the grandiose illusions of his "bogus knight," Niebuhr notes, but "we finally find ourselves laughing with a profounder insight at the bogus character of knighthood itself." America is Niebuhr's knight-errant.

American history certainly has its fair share of hypocrisy. Thomas Jefferson, for example, resolutely placed his "sacred honor" on the truth that all men are created equal—while running a feudal manor based on slave labor. But Jefferson's irony can be seen in his dream of America as a nation of self-reliant yeomen. American history, it turns out, had a different plan. We became an urbanized nation of factories and corporations. In the nineteenth century, America's divinely appointed role in the world had become clear to all: the inexorable course of history was calling us to spread the benefits of civilization across the continent and eventually into the Pacific. But these firmly held convictions about the innocence of our motives, the purity of our virtues, and the divine sanction of our manifest destiny led to a genocide against indigenous peoples and the colonization of the Hawaiian and Philippine Islands. There is a similar irony in American rhetoric extolling the self-reliant individual, laissez-faire economics, and minimalist government. In fact, throughout American history, the rich have manipulated government to make it serve their own interests.

George W. Bush was nothing if not fluent in the language of American exceptionalism. He spoke it with genuine piety and a certainty that was unnerving to some and an inspiration to others. His speeches touched on all the great themes. Americans, he said more than once, are "guided by a power larger than ourselves" and have "a calling from beyond the stars to stand for freedom." Again and again, he insisted, we have been a "friend and liberator" of the world, a "power that went into the world to protect but not possess, to defend but not to conquer." At West Point in 2002 he said, "We are in a conflict between good and evil." Increasingly his rhetoric disclosed a stark moral dualism. Terrorists represented "pure evil"—an evil beyond comprehension—and the mission of America was to destroy it for the sake of the world. Nor did Bush entertain doubt about the ineluctable course of history. "Liberty is the direction of history," he proclaimed—a history written, moreover, by an "Author who fills time and eternity with His purpose." "Evil is real," Bush insisted, but the purpose of history's Author is that "good will prevail

against it." And America was the agent of the good that would ultimately prevail.

What Niebuhr would have seen in this attitude is not hypocrisy but irony. The sincerity of President Bush's faith in American exceptionalism is beyond reproach; in fact, Bush is ironic *because of* his sincerity. He truly believed in America as a "power that went into the world to protect but not possess, to defend but not to conquer." But the realities of postcolonial dictators and the global oil system have made our foreign policy far more complicated—and morally ambiguous—than the rhetoric of American innocence can tolerate. Niebuhr could have had Bush in mind when he discerned great irony in the fact that "we do not think of ourselves as the potential masters, but as tutors of mankind in its pilgrimage to perfection." It's worth noting that this ironic point of view does not prevail in this country; even today, questioning American motives behind the debacle of Iraq invites criticism for "blaming America again."

Seen through the lens of Niebuhr's ideas, Bush's confidence that God has called the nation to a messianic mission in the world and that America stands at the vanguard of history clearly prevented the president—or protected him—from recognizing that history cannot be managed. Indeed, both Bush and Osama bin Laden believed that, with God on their side, they could remake the Middle East; and history has proven both wrong. During the arms race of the 1950s, Niebuhr wrote that, ironically, America was "less potent to do what it wants in the hour of its greatest strength than it was in its infancy." The same can be said of America today. The exercise of our immense economic and military power since World War II has led to the erosion of our security and now, in the midst of a war on terror, the abridgement of our rights. "The recalcitrant forces in the historical drama," Niebuhr wrote in 1952, "have a power and persistence beyond our reckoning."

Bush's ironies are rooted in the illusions of his belief in American exceptionalism. Barack Obama's ironies are of a different nature: they are the ironies of a man who is unable to believe these illusions. Perhaps the fact that he has read *The Irony of American History* contributes to this inability. In a widely discussed interview with David Brooks during Obama's first campaign for president, Senator Obama was asked what he had learned from Niebuhr. The candidate replied that Niebuhr offers the "compelling idea" that "there's serious evil in the world," and that "we should be humble and modest in our belief that we can eliminate [it]." We must make efforts to do so, but without "swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism."

This synopsis shows a clear affinity with Niebuhr. Yet Obama's lack of faith in American innocence brings us only halfway to understanding the irony of his own position and actions. Obama understands that no ideology, including American exceptionalism, lets us know the course of history in advance, and no policy can succeed at managing that course. At last year's National Prayer Breakfast, he observed that "While God may reveal his plan to us in portions, the expanse of his plan is for God and God alone to understand." Obama's irony is the inescapable irony of a man who knows he does not know enough to overcome the "moral ambiguities" of his policies, but who must act all the same, even when his actions violate his stated principles. The candidate who vowed to close Guantánamo and give prisoners due process in federal courts has been prevented from doing so by formidable political resistance. The senator who voted against the war in Iraq became the president who believed he was required by circumstances to order a significant escalation of that same war. The president who, in a historic address to Muslims in Cairo, promised that America would defend itself while remaining "respectful of the sovereignty of na-

SPRINGTIME IN CHICAGO IN NOVEMBER

Springtime in Chicago in November.
My forty-first year to heaven.
My left hand wants to know
what my right hand is doing.
Oh. Sorry I asked.

First comes love, which I disparage.
I blight with plagues a baby-carriage.
Green means go and red means red.
Now we're cooking with Sudafed.

Steer by, deerfly. I hereby declare
the deer tick on my derriere
a heretic. Derelict, hunker down.
Get the Led out, Goodman Brown.

Get thee behind me, Nathan.
Horseman, ramble on.
Springtime snows white hairs on me.
Green means go and go means gone.

—Michael Robbins

Michael Robbins is the author of the poetry collections Alien vs. Predator *(Penguin, 2012) and* The Second Sex *(Penguin, forthcoming). He's at work on a collection of criticism,* Equipment for Living, *forthcoming from Simon & Schuster.*

tions and the rule of law" is the president who has decided we must infuriate Pakistanis with drone strikes that cause the death of innocents. These ironies are bitter. Addressing the Turkish Parliament in 2009, Obama said that "human endeavor is by its nature imperfect." Niebuhr would have nodded in agreement and added that this imperfection does not excuse us from taking action in history. Moreover, Niebuhr realized that our inability to manage history makes acting in history inevitably ironic.

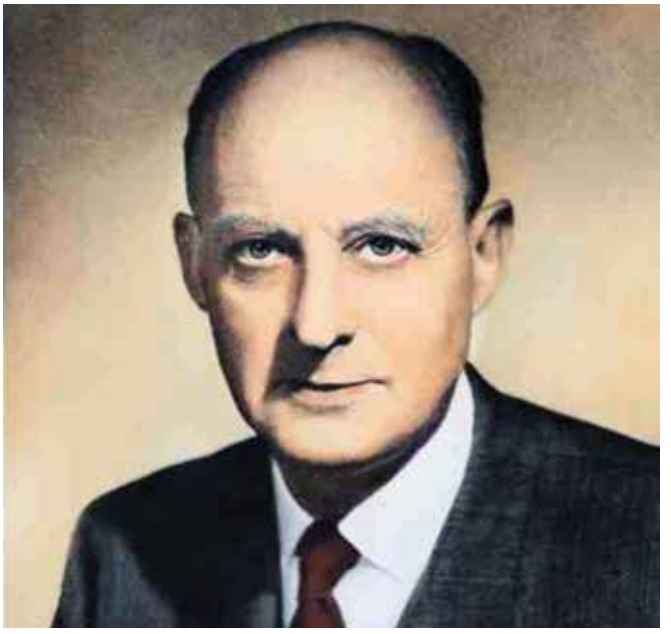
Niebuhr would have had no difficulty recognizing President Bush's irony; indeed, he spent a good deal of his life pointing out the illusions Americans harbor in order to protect themselves from the moral ambiguity of their actions. But I think Niebuhr would have recognized Obama's irony as his own irony, the one that fit his sense of his own personal predicament. In his life, Niebuhr moved from progressivism and the Social Gospel to pacifism and socialism. Then an encounter with evil in Germany forced him to reevaluate his past and mount a strident criticism of the idealism of his former friends. In the process he came to believe that ideologies—whether American exceptionalism or Marxist-Leninism—are primarily lies we embrace in order to protect ourselves from the burden of having to act in the face of history and its unmanageable outcomes. In the end, Niebuhr did not allow himself the luxury of an illusion. He acted in history knowing that he did not understand its course and could not control its outcome.

In light of these ideas it is worth asking, how might Niebuhr advise the president on the use of drones? Would Niebuhr view terrorism with the same moral urgency he expressed over the rise of National Socialism in Germany in the 1930s? Or would he condemn the use of drones as he did the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Chasing such hypotheticals can be a fool's errand, but I think Niebuhr would have supported Obama's use of drones. In May the president gave a major policy address on this topic, and Niebuhr would have found much to admire in it. The speech made clear that Obama has considered every tactic, weighing the alternatives and doing the dreadful moral calculus such a weighing requires. He is well aware that, even after taking all precautions—which he outlined at great length—a president ordering the use of drones may well end up destroying innocent lives. And yet, he reminded us, "doing nothing is not an option." I believe Niebuhr would recognize the moral ambiguity of Obama's situation and the inevitable ironies of acting or failing to act. But Niebuhr surely would also have much to say about the danger of Obama's drone policy, especially about the remoteness such weapons afford us, and about the illusion that there is a technological escape from the *moral* realities of raining hellfire down from heaven on our enemies.

To dismiss Niebuhr as inconsistent or merely pragmatic, as some have done, is to miss both the point and the power of the moral scrutiny he applied to the dilemmas of political

action. Today, though Islamic extremism has replaced Soviet communism in the minds of many as the principal threat to Western democracy, the need to recognize the moral ambiguities of our cause has not abated. To one degree or another, Niebuhr's insights will continue to be ignored—since we usually do not want to hear much about either our limitations or the unavoidably tragic dimensions of the decisions made in our name. It is my contention, however, that we are being led by a president who understands these dimensions. In Barack Obama's second inaugural address, the rhetoric of hope and renewal that filled his first inaugural was notably absent. In its place he stated a difficult truth. "We must act," the president reminded us. "We must act knowing that our work will be imperfect. We must act knowing that today's victories will be only partial." Reinhold Niebuhr could have written those words—about himself and his life, and about his country. ■

James L. Fredericks *teaches in the theology department of Loyola Marymount University.*



Reinhold Niebuhr

Andrew J. Bacevich

As a source of insight into the wellsprings of U.S. foreign policy, Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History* is an invaluable text. If you want to understand the ambitions, claims, and conceits animating the United States during its rise to power and still lingering today, then Niebuhr's your man and *Irony* the place to look.

As a policy handbook, however, *Irony* is all but devoid of value. When it comes to concrete and immediate concerns—dealing with Iran's nuclear ambitions, winding down the Afghanistan War, or preventing another bout of North Korean bad behavior, for example—Niebuhr's not much help.

To the statesman beset with problems, Niebuhr may offer warnings, but he provides little by way of actionable guidance. At best, Niebuhr's counsel serves as the equivalent of a flashing yellow traffic light at a busy intersection. Go, says the light, but proceed very, very carefully. As to the really crucial judgments—Go when? How fast? How far? In which direction?—well, you're on your own.

The statesman who heeds Niebuhr may avoid a certain category of egregious mistakes. When reaching the intersection, he'll at least pause and look both ways before hitting the accelerator. But heeding Niebuhr won't guarantee sound decisions or wise policies.

Barack Obama offers a case in point. Obama may well possess a Niebuhrean temperament, but the president has yet to demonstrate any particular aptitude for crafting foreign policy. To be sure, he has avoided the reckless misjudgments of his pedal-to-the-metal predecessor. For this, all Americans should be grateful. Yet as a basis for evaluating statesmanship, better-than-Bush can hardly suffice. In rankings where the Franklin Roosevelt of 1940–45 (not the FDR of 1933–39) represents the gold standard, Obama languishes as an also-ran. A notch or two above, say, Lyndon Johnson, he trails well behind Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and even Richard Nixon.

As Niebuhr himself recognized, international politics is a competition for power, the possession of power translating (however imperfectly) into security, prosperity, and the ability to influence. Here, according to the tenets of Christian realism, are the criteria by which citizens should—and history will—judge Obama's performance as a statesman.

Relative to that standard, the president's performance has been indifferent at best. Granted, like Nixon in 1969, he inherited a weak hand. But unlike Nixon, whose opening to China had transformative strategic implications, Obama has demonstrated little by way of vision and almost none of the dexterity required to translate vision into reality.

What distinguishes Obama's major foreign-policy initiatives—examples include the "reset" of U.S.-Russian relations, the "pivot to Asia," and above all the "new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world" promised in Cairo—is how little they have yielded in substantive terms. To quote Walter Mondale, "Where's the beef?"

The president's principal foreign-policy successes have been negative ones: deferring war with Iran; avoiding war with North Korea; endorsing the American public's strong desire to quit and then forget Iraq; and reframing the Afghanistan War so that the United States can depart without having to admit failure. Note that none of these successes qualifies as conclusive.

Reinhold Niebuhr would have little difficulty in explaining why Obama's record of achievement is so thin. Despite all the media-stoked hoopla surrounding his ascent to the

presidency, reality turned out to be more complicated than it appeared when the celebratory crowds jammed Chicago's Grant Park back on Election Day 2008. The laughably premature verdict of the Nobel Prize Committee notwithstanding, the world was not quite ready to confer on Obama the laurel wreath of global savior-emperor. Once he was installed in office, the president's ability to charm and persuade turned out to be less than advertised, as Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu, not to mention obstreperous Republicans, wasted little time in demonstrating.

Obama's supporters—and Obama himself—had indulged the anti-Niebuhrean notion that his presidency marked a decisive break from the past and a new beginning. Everything was going to be different. Events soon demonstrated that this oldest of American political illusions was just that. If members of the public got snookered by Obamamania—"Yes we can heal this nation. Yes we can repair this world"—they have only themselves to blame.

James Fredericks speculates that our Niebuhrean president probably takes quite seriously the "dreadful moral calculus" inherent in personally deciding whom the U.S. government will assassinate in the name of national security, knowing that the U.S. drone attacks he orders will also on occasion kill innocent noncombatants. Fredericks believes that Niebuhr himself would applaud Obama's moral seriousness and by extension approve of his policy. After all, given the threat posed by terrorism, "doing nothing is not an option."

Without claiming the ability to channel Niebuhr's spirit, mark me down as skeptical. My own guess is that Niebuhr would have some questions he'd want Obama to answer:

- Given the resentment among local populations generated by these violations of sovereignty and especially by reports (even if untrue) of civilian casualties, how many terrorists are we creating for every one we kill?
- What sort of precedent is the United States establishing through its program of targeted assassination? As drone technology proliferates, won't other nations assert the same prerogatives currently exercised by Washington? With what implications?
- Will targeted assassination ever eliminate or even reduce the causes of violent Islamic radicalism? Or does it merely serve as an excuse for ignoring root causes?

Absent satisfactory answers to those questions, my guess is that Niebuhr would condemn Obama's drone campaign as *both* ill-conceived *and* immoral. In the wake of 9/11, doing nothing may not be an option, but targeted assassination is hardly the only option. If Obama can't come up with anything better, then he's the wrong man for the job. ■

Andrew J. Bacevich *is professor of history and international relations at Boston University. His most recent book is* Breach of Trust: How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country *(Metropolitan Books).*

Richard Alleva

Odd Couples

'PHILOMENA' & 'SAVING MR. BANKS'

Steve Coogan and Judi Dench in Philomena

Philomena is the kind of movie that compels a reviewer to say what it isn't before trying to say what it is. That's because the bare bones of its plot suggest the very sort of entertainment the filmmakers have carefully avoided making.

The eponymous heroine of this true story is an elderly Irish woman (Judi Dench) yearning to get in touch with the child she birthed in the early 1950s, when she was one of the so-called Magdalene girls in the stern charge of Sisters of Mercy. The nuns assisted in the delivery of illegitimate babies, then put the young unwed mothers to punishing work in the convent while often handing over their infants to childless Americans in return for substantial donations. Getting no help in finding her grown-up child from the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, Philomena turns to Martin Sixsmith, a former BBC journalist who became a spin doctor for Tony Blair's government before being dismissed for an inappropriate comment. Sixsmith hopes that writing a sentimental exposé about Philomena's plight will help rehabilitate his career. He accompanies her to the United States, where they learn that her son Anthony grew up to become the highly successful Michael Hess, a legal adviser to Presidents Reagan and Bush senior, and also a closeted gay man who died of AIDS after faithfully serving a regime that refused funding for AIDS research.

Given this scenario, you might have expected one of those movies that jerk tears while reaffirming "the greatness of the human spirit"—or, perhaps, an angry exposé of the Catholic Church. But no. Though it is clear about the wrongs done and gives us a touching portrait of a questing mother, *Philomena* turns out to be dry-eyed, witty, and compassionate without ever getting weepy. Essentially, it's a comedy about a mismatched couple whose shared adventure does nothing to reconcile clashing temperaments and opposed beliefs. Philomena, who goes by "Phil," is a radically simple soul who can never acquire Martin's sophisticated understanding of the way institutions often work at the expense of individuals. (Having been a spin doctor himself, Martin spots the new convent superior as one more of the breed.) For his part, Martin can never summon up the compassion for all human frailty that leads Philomena to forgive the one nun who survives from the bad old days, now a senile crone whom Sixsmith would like to tip out of her wheelchair when she spews forth her fiercely clung-to bigotry. Philomena's forgiveness isn't motivated by any hope for change in her former tormentor but by the instinctive insight that personal hatred shrivels the soul. "I'm still angry!" shouts Martin at the climax, but Philomena, a stranger to both priggishness and rancor, can only wonder at his self-corrosive bitterness.

Written by Jeff Pope and Steve Coogan (who also plays Sixsmith) and directed by Stephen Frears, *Philomena* possesses a wonderful balance of feeling for its two protagonists. Neither script nor direction plays favorites, but, by constantly shifting from one viewpoint to the other, the film has us smiling with compassion at the foibles of both characters. Sixsmith, something of a highbrow, must endure Philomena's preference for chain restaurants and her relentless recounting of the plots of Harlequin romances. When, after an exhaustive and exhausting summary of her latest paperback, she offers it to him, his reply—"Gosh, I feel as if I've almost read it"—makes us laugh, but her abiding innocence keeps us from feeling superior. On the other hand, innocence has its limitations. While Philomena is too easily placated by the convent superior's smarmy "We can't take away your pain but we can walk you through it," Martin can see right through the blarney. Philomena needs his savvy, and he comes to respond to her peculiar goodness.

Sometimes the comedy modulates into something more mysterious, as when the search leads our couple to a female colleague of the dead Michael, who cautiously inquires whether Philomena knows that her son was gay. Not immediately responding to that, Philomena asks if Michael had any children, which makes Sixsmith assume that this "little old Irish lady" (as Sixsmith's wife calls her) simply doesn't grasp the modern meaning of "gay." Yet a moment later, Philomena calmly refers to her son as a "gay homosexual" and the redundancy, comic though it is, leads the journalist (and us) to suspect that Philomena might be much better informed and more broad-minded than anyone sus-

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pected. But is she really? When Martin questions her about a clue he's spotted in an old photo—the son's lapel pin in the shape of an Irish harp—Philomena replies, "Well, maybe he played the harp. After all, he was gay."

Stephen Frears's direction is the simplest of his career. Grasping that the film's success depends entirely on our enjoying the company of the two beguiling protagonists, he keeps his camera on the right face at the right moment. The actors do the rest.

Critics speak about the autumnal grandeur of "lateness in art"—the tranquil power of Beethoven's late quartets or the swan-song poignancy of Verdi's *Falstaff*. Judi Dench has that quality as an actress nowadays, and it's not just an inevitable feature of her old age. She's in possession of a still center, and from that center she radiates. But the critical praise heaped on Dench shouldn't keep us from noticing that Steve Coogan's wry underplaying of Sixsmith makes Dench's beatific comedy possible. With his boredom-glazed eyes desperately beseeching invisible gods for mercy as she blathers on and on, and his smooth baritone subtly inflected by covert sarcasm, Coogan is the Oxbridge Oliver Hardy to her female Stan Laurel. And would Stan be truly funny without Ollie?

It was appropriate that *Philomena* became the surprise hit of the Christmas season, for, paradoxically, with this story premised on the cruelty of a Catholic institution, the filmmakers have created the most Christian film since *Tender Mercies*.

Like *Philomena*, *Saving Mr. Banks* also features two great actors playing comically mismatched protagonists. As P. L. Travers—the author who arrives at Disneyland in 1961 to hear Walt's plans to put her *Mary Poppins* stories on screen—Emma Thompson confirms that she is the best movie actress in the English-speaking world. As Disney, Tom Hanks proves that he is that rarity in Hollywood: a star who is also a character actor. (Paul Giamatti, who contributes another of his gems as Travers's chauffeur, is a great actor who will never quite be a star.)

In Thompson's portrayal, Travers is the embodiment of all those newly emancipated women of her generation who had to prove themselves, in the academic or literary world, to be just as literate, strong-minded, and exacting as the men. Visiting the Leviathan of Vulgarity that is (in her eyes) America/California/Disneyland, Travers has all the narrow-eyed disdainfulness of an Oxford don entering a cage of feces-throwing monkeys. Her voice is soaked in an acid concocted of defensiveness, outraged culture, and personal disappointment. Her mouth (as Oscar Wilde said of André Gide's) was formed to say no. And that's why Hanks's Walt, a benevolent engine of yea-saying, is the perfect antagonist for her. The actor, employing a soothing growl and a super-salesman's glint, comes off as a real-life Wizard of Oz, a blend of Midwestern dreaminess and practicality that, in show business at least, makes fakery look like a virtue.

The script, by Kelly Marcel and Sue Smith, is just as witty in its treatment of the Travers-Disney collision as you would hope, but, alas, this duel of cultures and temperaments takes up only two-thirds of the film. The rest is a series of flashbacks to the author's Australian childhood, which explain the author's defensiveness all too neatly by recounting the trauma of having an alcoholic father and a suicidal mother. Travers invents Mary Poppins as the perfect nanny who will make everything right. As psychology and as storytelling these scenes are banal and predictable: the child keeps yearning, the mother keeps glowering, the father keeps stumbling. Nothing in them begins to suggest why this particular child grew into the idiosyncratic person that Emma Thompson gives us. Whence came the wit, the pride of authorship, the snarkiness?

Saving Mr. Banks is the sort of movie that makes me grateful for DVDs. A few months from now I'll be fast-forwarding through those flashbacks to savor, over and over, the brilliance of Tom Hanks and Emma Thompson. ■

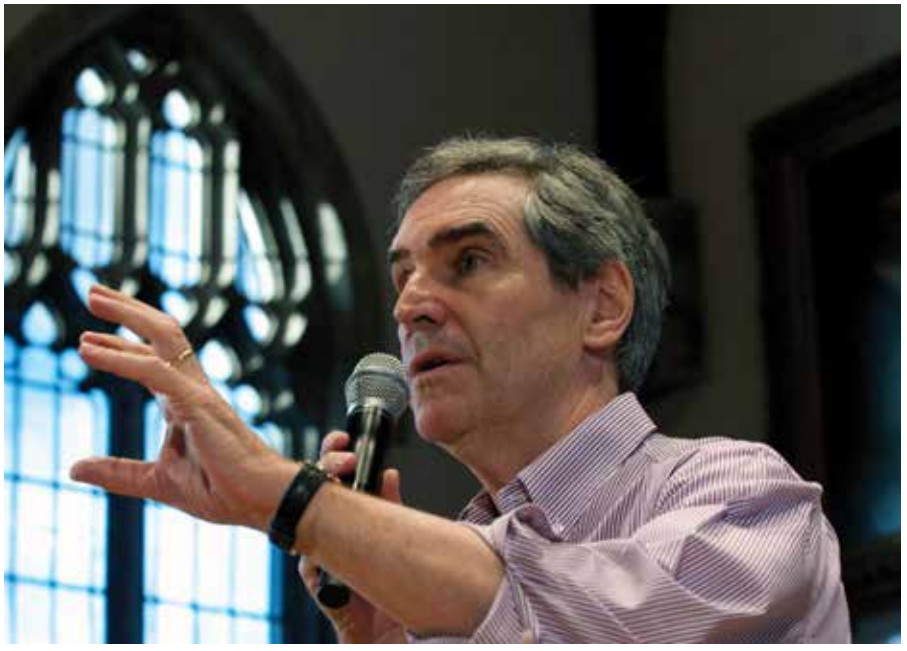
E. J. Dionne Jr.

Not Beanbag

Fire and Ashes
Success and Failure in Politics
Michael Ignatieff
Harvard University Press, $24.95, 224 pp.

Reading Michael Ignatieff's reflective and somewhat wistful book, stocked with practical and philosophical ruminations inspired by his temporary move from academia to Canadian politics, made me wish he had succeeded in becoming his country's prime minister. Ignatieff's constructive approach to politics, like his commitments to democracy and social justice, remains admirably untainted by the bitter experiences he describes. Yet his account makes clear why his noble adventure as leader of Canada's Liberal Party ended in failure.

And failure is an understatement. The Liberals long managed to be Canada's natural party of government by occupying the political center, but in 2011 that center disappeared, and Ignatieff led the party to its worst defeat in history. "We'd run the country for most of the twentieth century by owning the middle ground," he writes mournfully, "but I could feel support bleeding away from both sides." So bad was the bloodletting that his party emerged with only 34 seats in Canada's 308-member House of Commons, and its candidates won only 19 percent of the popular vote, while the Conservative Party of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who had been leading a minority government before the election, won a clear majority of seats. Perhaps most humiliating, the Liberals were displaced as the main opposition by the New Democrats (NDP), a social-democratic party propelled forward by the appeal of its down-to-earth and politically shrewd leader, Jack Layton. Tragically, Layton died of cancer within months of the election, but not before the NDP won 103 seats and nearly 31 percent of the popular vote.



Michael Ignatieff

COURTESY MICHAEL IGNATIEFF

Fire and Ashes provides a deeply thoughtful if sometimes elusive account of its author's experiences as an intellectual in politics. Two facts are worth underscoring. The first is that despite Harper's successes and political skills, Canada still tilts rather strongly to the center-left. The second is that the folksy and familiar Layton proved to be the perfect vehicle for anti-Harper voters, who pulled away from Ignatieff, a longtime resident in the United States, where he had been (and is again) a professor at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. Ignatieff found himself the victim of withering Conservative advertisements aimed at undermining him before the campaign even started—ads that accused him of "just visiting" Canada after decades away in order to obtain power. It didn't help with the left that as a liberal hawk he had supported the Iraq war.

A human-rights activist whose books include an excellent biography of the philosopher Isaiah Berlin, Ignatieff is still angry about the campaign assault he faced. Yet he's a teacher at heart and manages in *Fire and Ashes* to turn his irritation into an instructive lesson about the importance of "standing" in politics. His analysis of whether a politician is given a hearing, or denied it by having his or her legitimacy undermined in advance, is the most important insight in his book. Certain styles of negative advertising, Ignatieff argues, create a "politics of enemies" and undermine democratic deliberation. "In this perversion of the game, politics is modeled as war itself," he writes. "The aim is not to defeat an adversary but to destroy an enemy by denying him standing."

Unfashionably, Ignatieff stoutly defends political parties, and his case is worth attending to: "In a time of social fragmentation," he writes, "where we

are ever more walled off by class and income, race, religion, and age, where so many people live alone, where the public square feels deserted, a political party is the place where strangers come together to defend what they hold in common and to fight for a common cause." And yet he worries about the excesses of partisanship, and in particular about the consequences of "loose macho talk about politics as war." Noting Clausewitz's famous characterization of war as the continuation of politics by other means, he insists that the inverse is not true. "[P]olitics is not the continuation of war. It is the alternative to it. We care about politics, defend it, seek to preserve its vitality, because its purpose is to save us from the worst."

Such supple musings on the nature of power are why I would have liked to see Ignatieff wield power himself; there is an empathy in his worldview that works in tandem with a realism he learned from Isaiah Berlin—a wisdom about the limits of politics. Just as welcome are his insights into Canada's social problems, some thoroughly familiar to Americans. He speaks not only about the familiar divide between haves and have-nots, but also about "an inequality that no one was talking about," between "two kinds of places." There were those, he writes, "where you could make a living where you grew up, and those you had to leave if you wanted a chance of a better life.... I became determined to fight for a country where hope is fairly distributed, where everyone gets to build a life where they stand."

Among the important lessons this liberal offers to those who share his worldview is one he learned while trying to make government work on behalf of people in his own parliamentary district. "Liberals put their faith in good government, but we often make the mistake of falling for our own good intentions," he writes. It's a warning that may have special resonance for Americans in light of the problems the Obama administration is having in implementing the Affordable Care Act. "The reality of government-service delivery," Ignatieff adds, "is something to see: often dilatory, arbitrary, and just plain inefficient." Such discouraging realities alienate constituents, with predictable consequences. "Once the liberal state fails to treat citizens with respect, citizens conclude the less they have to do with it the better, and the less they have to do with the state, the lower they want their taxes to be." In his case, as in Obama's, the political beneficiaries of what Ignatieff calls "this downward spiral" were his conservative opponents.

Ignatieff's bracing, bruising experience has sharpened a gift for insightful one-liners. "While politicians are often condemned for opportunism, being a skillful opportunist is the essence of the political art." "Politicians have to negotiate trust against the backdrop of permanent distrust of their own profession." "Every community wants recognition of their own distinctiveness, but is reluctant to grant it to others." The former candidate offers a pair of seemingly paradoxical lessons on candor in politics. On the one hand, he advises politicians, "Be candid if you can, be strategic if you must," reminding them that while "all truth is good...not all truth is good to say." Yet to politicians who get out of the habit of speaking their minds he offers this warning: "If you stop saying what you think now, you'll forget what it's supposed to sound like when you finally get the chance."

The discomfort inherent in the contradiction between those two sentiments captures his ambivalence about the political art as he describes it. He seems at times abstracted from his political role and, for the most part, does not appear to have had a lot of fun playing it. He displays an Obama-like impatience with the routine requirements of politics, especially when it comes to dealing with other politicians. "I was running to lead a party whose culture of intrigue disgusted me," he confesses, "but I was seeking votes from loyalists who wouldn't vote for me if my disgust was too plain." Though he is probably right about his party's culture of intrigue, there's a certain condescension here, and you suspect that he didn't hide that disgust very well.

In the end, one feels, Ignatieff was not cut out to be a politician. There is none of Bill Clinton's reveling in the fight or his savoring the minute details of the latest polling. Recently I happened to read out loud—to a hard-bitten American political consultant—Ignatieff's account of how attacks on a candidate's standing undercut politics. I spoke with some sympathy for this view, but the consultant's response was instantaneous and dismissive: "That's the whining of a loser." That wasn't entirely fair, and Ignatieff is right that the imbalances of Canadian campaign financing left him in a poor position to respond to the attacks. But you do wonder whether a more skilled and seasoned politician—one with a greater love for the game—might have found a way around these challenges.

Still, I found myself in solidarity with Ignatieff in the end, sharing his sadness at the Liberals' disastrous election night and at his own defeat. Many, maybe most, intellectuals lack the temperament to be political leaders. Yet we do need practically minded intellectuals in politics; and in other circumstances Ignatieff might have had the right stuff. It reflects well on him that he left the stage still believing in the virtues of politics and democracy, and strongly asserting a democratic politician's obligation to stewardship. "There is no guarantee that history is on liberty's side or that democracy will prevail against its resurgent competitors," he writes. "Seen in this international dimension, a politician's duty is not just to defend democracy at home but [to] vindicate its virtues to the larger world." Perhaps it takes someone whom the voters have cast aside to offer a truly credible and heartfelt brief for democracy. ■

E. J. Dionne Jr., *a longtime contributor, is a columnist for the* Washington Post, *university professor at Georgetown, and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. His most recent book is* Our Divided Political Heart: The Battle for the American Idea in an Age of Discontent *(Bloomsbury).* ▯

Thomas F. X. Noble

Squeaky Hinge

Heretics and Heroes

How Renaissance Artists and Reformation Priests Created Our World

Thomas Cahill

Nan A. Talese, $29.95, 368 pp.

This is a very difficult book to review because, as Gertrude Stein famously said about Oakland, "There is no there there." Cahill's newest installment in his "Hinges of History" series—now six volumes with a further one planned—is a long series of vignettes organized more or less chronologically. The volume does not present a coherent argument or thesis, although on careful inspection it does reveal a few basic perspectives and emphases.

The book's title does not give away much. Few of the book's major characters were in any conventional sense heretics or heroes, and it is easy to think of aspects of "our world" that owe little to Renaissance artists or Reformation priests. On page 182 Cahill reveals his argument: "In this series of books, The Hinges of History, we are looking at dramas of origination. We are attempting repeatedly to answer the questions: How did *x* or *y* get started? How did this or that valued aspect of our contemporary lives come to be?" If one tries hard to make Cahill's meandering discussion respond to those questions, one can vaguely make sense of the book as a whole. More than a hundred pages later, in the book's "postlude," Cahill apologizes for not fully covering the Renaissance and Reformation—a prodigious understatement—and says he has investigated "how each of those immense movements has given us a part of the mechanism of our functioning contemporary selves." Those words are not easy to understand but they point to a persistent presentism, a tendency to view the past through the lens of the present.

Martin Luther *by Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1529*

So what originated with the Renaissance and Reformation? The prime novelty seems to be the ego, "the personal 'I,' the self as we now understand it." Columbus and Martin Luther are the chief exhibits brought out to support this contention. More generally, the book emphasizes "men and women of courage." Courage means the will and ability to buck prevailing trends, be they cultural, intellectual, political, or religious. So, Erasmus and Luther are "deviant monks." Cahill seems to admire Savanarola's spiritual rebellion but he most certainly does not like what the Florentine Dominican believed and taught. Donatello gets high marks, as do Michelangelo, Galileo, and Henry of Navarre—Henry IV of France. Cahill appears to like the way Luther challenged the Catholic Church but seems repelled by Luther himself. So, to be modern is to be egotistical and rebellious, and these qualities originated in the Renaissance and Reformation.

At book's end there are a few more hints of what it is about. Cahill concludes his "investigation" of the Renaissance and Reformation with very brief discussions of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Pope John XXIII, and Muriel Moore (of whom I had never heard; she was a long-lived New Yorker who ran a soup kitchen). These were generous and courageous people. Cahill imagines them engaged in a celestial conversation that, free from "careerists, time-servers, and assorted fanatics," would heal the rift in Christendom. The irenic note on which the book ends clashes with the central thrust of its contents. If modernity was generated by egotism and rebellion, and was a good thing in so far as it lifted us out of the spiritual and cultural doldrums of the Middle Ages, why would one wish to put down the rebellion with heaping doses of selflessness?

At one point Cahill offers a set of historical reflections, which bring to the surface another intriguing contradiction.

> There is nothing remotely rational or moderate about apocalyptic thinking, which inevitably attracts fanatics, raving or otherwise. Instead, how about trying the wisdom of gradualism, incrementalism, and rational grappling with human difficulties and challenges? Human beings who are drawn instinctively to moderation rather than to extremes will inevitably find such an approach far more congenial than black-and-white versions of the End of All Things.

Perhaps. But the key figures in Cahill's book are anything but moderate, gradual, incremental. And they are original, modern, and admirable precisely because of their unwillingness to accept the world as they found it and their impatience about changing it.

Cahill can draw memorable pen-portraits. I was especially struck by his treatments of Piero della Francesca, Albrecht Dürer, and William Tyndale. In fact, the book's most successful dimension is its treatment of artists. Yet he concludes that everything after Michelangelo was mere imitation until he comes to Caravaggio, who was the real deal. His treatment of religious figures is sprightly but often leaves much to be desired. Cardinal Cajetan was a "nap-inducing theologian." He calls Ignatius Loyola a "phallic narcissist" and concludes, "What a guy." John Calvin was a "tightly wound dude."

Cahill has read widely but not deeply. He begins with the Sicilian Vespers—a rebellion in 1282 against Charles of Anjou—and argues that the uprising produced a split in Christendom and a fatal blow to papal authority. These are exaggerated claims. Cahill says that the Black Death upset most aspects of the medieval worldview but he does not explore this matter in detail, concluding instead, "St. Francis of Assisi, meet Bernie Madoff." He seems not to understand the intricate matter of indulgences, saying instead that to understand them one "must visit the fun house of medieval theology." Be that as it may, he does not take his readers into the fun house, glides over the Treasury of Merit, and sums up: "Huh?" His account of the religious wars of the sixteenth century lacks depth and nuance. The book has almost nothing to say about women. Angela Merici gets a couple of paragraphs under the heading

"Nuns with Guns." She had no guns and she founded schools for girls. She was not, initially at least, a nun. Rabelais gets several pages—and pretty good ones—but Montaigne gets half a paragraph. Shakespeare earns one-and-a-half pages, Cervantes a page. John Donne gets about two pages and Rembrandt almost three, but by the time these figures come up one is left wondering what they are doing in a book on the Renaissance and the Reformation.

Cahill slips a few times on the ice of accuracy. He confuses the curriculum of Bologna with that of the northern universities. Luther went to Rome in 1510, not 1511, and he could not have traveled southeast from Wittenberg to Heidelberg. It is not true that most libraries in Gutenberg's time had fewer than a hundred books. Pieter Breugel was Flemish, not Dutch, and he was born in what is now Belgium, not the Netherlands. Interdict was not the excommunication of everyone in a specific area.

Heretics and Heroes is a very personal reading of people and history. For example, "Dante, in Petrarch's estimation, belonged to the insufferable Dark Ages, just another whimpering breast-beater caught up in a trap of his own phantasmagoric fears." This is simply wrong. Cahill prefers Lorenzo's sonnets to Petrarch's poems, which were, he says, "mostly in bland, imitative Latin." Has Cahill read Petrarch's hauntingly beautiful *Canzoniere*, all 366 of them? I suspect that not everyone will agree that Thomas More's *Utopia* was filled with "exhaustingly cute sentences" and "may indeed be the most blandly boring short book ever written (but one that I have read on your behalf)."

I mentioned already that the book has a presentist tendency. Cahill condescends to Catholics and conservatives. He elicits dubious parallels with modern bankers, vulture capitalists, the modern curia, and PACs. To me, this "Hinge of History," like the ones before it, is rusty, and it squeaks. ■

Thomas F. X. Noble *is professor of history at the University of Notre Dame.*

Igor Lukes

Witness

Story of a Secret State

My Report to the World

Jan Karski

Georgetown University Press, $16.95, 464 pp.

The title of this book promises an insider's perspective on *Armia Krajowa* (AK), Poland's Home Army, the largest resistance organization in Nazi-occupied Europe, and the book delivers it. But Jan Karski also served as a liaison officer between the AK, the Polish government-in-exile, and Western allies. In that capacity, he took great risks to bring before the Allied leaders first-hand evidence regarding the Holocaust. Not only did the book, written during the war, offer insight into the workings of the AK, it also provided what turned out to be accurate information regarding the methods used by the Nazis in their effort to exterminate the Jews.

The book's opening scenes could hardly have been more somber. The twenty-five-year-old Karski had barely fallen asleep when he was woken by banging on the door. Still groggy after an elegant party, he found himself staring at a policeman who handed him a mobilization order. Within hours he was on a train, one of many soldiers reporting for duty.

Although the threat of war was in the air, few in Poland knew that on that very day, August 24, 1939, Hitler's envoy Joachim von Ribbentrop and Stalin's representative Vyacheslav Molotov had signed an agreement that divided Eastern Europe between the Nazis and the Soviets. Hitler secured the secret deal with Stalin so that Germany would not have to open a second front against the Soviet Union, something he did with disastrous results later in the war. The agreement made Germany's aggression against Poland possible and World War II inevitable. A German attack on Poland meant war with France and Britain, both of whom had guaranteed Polish territorial integrity.

Even as late as August 1939, surprisingly few in Poland appeared to be bothered by the escalating crisis. Karski's relatives thought that the conflict would be over within a month, with their side victorious. And Karski saw a young recruit who assured his tearful mother: "Soon you can come and visit me in Berlin." Others thought Hitler was only bluffing and had no appetite for war, or believed that the combined forces of Poland and its British and French allies would easily rebuff the Germans.

The reality could not have been more different—or worse. Overwhelmed by the Wehrmacht and Luftwaffe offensive on September 1, 1939, the Polish Army retreated eastward to regroup, but there it ran into the Red Army that invaded Poland in concert with Hitler. Before he had any opportunity to engage either of the two enemies in combat, Karski became a prisoner of war, first of the Soviets, and then of the Germans. He escaped from the latter and joined the underground resistance.

Karski had the talents for clandestine work. He was disciplined, had an excellent memory, and could improvise; his mastery of languages was also crucial. In January 1940 his superiors ordered Karski to go to Paris with messages for the Polish government-in-exile. He executed that mission well, but his second effort as a courier ended terribly. He was arrested by the Gestapo and severely beaten. Fearful that he would break under further torture, he attempted suicide. Eventually his comrades put together a plan for Karski's escape from the prison-hospital that was successful.

Soon Karski was back working in the resistance. The most moving chapters in this memoir are those dealing with the indispensable role played in the under-

Jan Karski

ground by women and by those involved in secret educational institutions. To run any higher-level school was a capital crime. Therefore a certificate of a passed examination was often written on the reverse side of a calling card bearing the examiner's cover name: "Thank you for your charming visit on September 29, 1942. I was most satisfied. You told me such interesting things."

In the late summer of 1942, Karski took on an especially important mission. It was clear by then that the traditional escape route from Poland to the West via Hungary was no longer viable; he would have to go directly through Germany, France, Spain, and Gibraltar. Before he left, Karski was ordered to meet with two envoys from the embattled Jewish community, one from the Zionist movement and the other from the Bund. It was at this meeting that Karski learned the dimensions of the Holocaust, and realized that nothing in history was comparable "with what was inflicted on the Jewish population of Poland." Hopeful that Karski might see Roosevelt and Churchill, the Jewish leaders urged him to inform the Allies of the "more than 1,850,000 Jews" who had already been murdered. In the end, 3 million Polish Jews would perish in the Holocaust, along with 3 million Poles. The Nazis' "aims and methods are without precedent in history," Karski was told; the Jewish representatives demanded reciprocal brutal measures to be employed against the German people. The two Jewish leaders also asked for greater sacrifices from the Jewish communities in the West: "Tell the Jewish leaders that...the earth must be shaken to its foundations, the world must be aroused."

The Zionist and Bund representatives then smuggled Karski into the Warsaw Ghetto. What he saw there changed him forever: "Everywhere there was hunger, misery, the atrocious stench of decomposing bodies, the pitiful moans of dying children, the desperate cries and gasps of a people struggling for life against impossible odds." Karski arranged a second visit, "the better to testify to the truth before the leading men and women of the free countries of the world." Finally, he agreed to be smuggled inside an annex to the extermination camp at Belzec, where he witnessed further unspeakable assaults on defenseless Jews.

Karski did reach Great Britain and also the United States. He met Anthony Eden and many others in England and proceeded to Washington, where he arrived in July 1943. He met with President Roosevelt, who, like the British, was sympathetic and friendly but noncommittal. Justice Felix Frankfurter explicitly rejected Karski's report on the Holocaust as untrue.

The one person who fully understood the news regarding the Nazi camps was Szmul Zygelbojm, one of the leaders of the Bund who escaped to England. In May 1943, Karski learned that Zygelbojm had turned on the gas in his apartment and died in protest against the indifference and selfishness of the world. For the rest of his life Karski felt close to this noble man who saw that victory over Nazism would come too late to prevent "annihilation of all that was most meaningful to him."

This book was originally published in 1944, and one of its goals was to strengthen Allied resolve and sense of purpose. Consequently, Karski watered down or suppressed altogether the tragic fact that the political elites in Britain and the United States did not seem particularly disturbed by his evidence regarding the Holocaust. After the war, he propounded that message in countless public presentations on the topic. What the Allies could have done to stop the slaughter of the Jews remains a contentious question. But there is no question that Karski's testimony remains essential for such a debate. ■

Igor Lukes *is University Professor, and professor of international relations and history, at Boston University. He is the author of* On the Edge of the Cold War: American Diplomats and Spies in Postwar Prague *(Oxford), among other books.*

Nick Ripatrazone

Borrowed Voices

Song & Error

Averill Curdy
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $23, 112 pp.

In "Northwest Passage," a poem that exemplifies the aesthetic of Averill Curdy's debut collection, the narrator stands on a deck under the morning's "first pale peach jeopardy / of light." The poem is not Yeatsian in imagery or import, but it does dramatize Yeats's belief that verse rhythms "prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation." Curdy's language is soft: light flushes and touches; gardens seethe. Curdy imagines the explorer Martin Frobisher returning to England, three times, with only "fool's gold." Frobisher's ambitious folly is contrasted with the narrator's comparatively mundane "new world," of "linden's melon scent twined / around an untuned engine's blue carbon / Monoxide." In this poem Curdy speaks as herself about a world beyond her own before returning to the familiar. Just as often, though, Curdy assumes a persona, describing an imagined world from an imagined point of view.

A former arts administrator, marketing manager, and technical writer, Curdy began writing poetry consistently in the mid-1990s. The art form was a salve, the "secret life inside [her] life." She earned an MFA from the University of Houston, and regular publication followed in *Poetry*, the *Kenyon Review*, and the *Paris Review*. She co-edited *The Longman Anthology of Poetry* in 2005. (Writing about this project in *Poetry* magazine, she observed that "Elizabeth Bishop and Emily Dickinson seem to be the only poets on whom everyone agrees.") Curdy has claimed that she writes "at the very limit of what I know"—a humble sentiment, and one that accepts poetry's ability, and perhaps its obligation, to stretch both thought and language.

The persona poem is a literary form that stretches the poet's whole self by temporarily putting it aside. It should not be surprising, then, that persona poems make up nearly half of this collection. Among those whose voices Curdy assumes are George Sandys, Álvar Nuñez Cabeza da Vaca, Constance Fenimore Woolson, and John Audubon. Sandys is a great choice: he served from 1621 to 1624 as treasurer of the Virginia Company at Jamestown, where he completed his translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. "Ovid in America" documents Sandys's first two years at the colony, beginning with his voyage and the promise that "this page is small yet stout enough / To bear me whole upon it to you." These words are addressed to Sandys's correspondent, the poet Thomas Carew, but they feel as if they could just as well be meant for us. Sandys moves from personal discussion to a vivid description of the 1622 massacre. Survivors of the Powhatan attack "languish like sparrows sunk in a frozen pond / staring up at shadows, waiting / The sign that will call them back to life." "The aftertaste of lead" commingles with "the smell of breakfast." Curdy's funereal sense is ripe: Sandys is surrounded by "red garlands of red roses / Wrapped around white throats, white / As bacon fat." What can be done in the face of such carnage? Acceptance: "I watch the flies at their devotions, & I learn."

Averill Curdy

Curdy's personae work best as lenses rather than mirrors. We get stories told with a distinctive, self-revealing voice rather than outright self-portraiture. "The Fair Incognito" is presented as Audobon's epistolary account of being asked by a mysterious woman from New Orleans to paint her nude; in payment, she offers a "handsome rifle." In the strangeness of such an episode "imagination out- / strips event." What Curdy's Audobon tells us about drawing, the poet is also telling us about her own art: "to draw well, the eye must abrade / the line over and o- / ver again, not fevered / like the lover, but like the prisoner." In "From the Lost Correspondence," Curdy imagines a letter from Woolson to Henry James, who, after Woolson's apparent suicide in Venice, attempted to submerge her dresses in the lagoon. But they kept rising to the surface. Similarly, this "lost" letter rises to the surface, dragging up hints of missed opportunities and prefiguring James's regret. Curdy's Woolson asks James, "Do I confuse you?" Read in the long shadow of her death, the question stings us.

While the personae poems give *Song & Error* some of its breadth, the depth of Curdy's work is no less evident elsewhere in this collection—in poems such as "Northwest Passage," for example, where the range is narrow but not provincial, a fragment of history opening

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out into the actual. "Dark Room," the final poem in the collection, shifts the focus from human personae to the world itself as a kind of personality: "some unperishing, excited / Engine, without limit, without us."

What all the poems have in common is a sharp awareness of perspective: sometimes this means an "I" who is not really Curdy; sometimes it means a "we" where the reader might have expected an "I." "Visiting the Largest Live Rattlesnake Exhibit in North America" starts with the lament that with each day comes "another dolor." Silence is followed by the sounds of a single fly, talk radio, and cars "nosing" into a parking lot. The land is desolate "for 100 miles / In any direction," and only ephemeral novelties entertain the travellers as they begin their long journey to the destination announced in the title. Having arrived, they stand in front of "lit vitrines," fascinated by pit vipers "so sentient they stared back." The visitors imagine themselves like the "Royal Society's frock-coated members," in shock but entertained by the stories of violence and death in this "New World." They know there are forces beyond human control, the "blue out of which disaster strikes," but they aren't afraid of the snake behind thin glass: "votively we cluster / In the dark." Such an evocation of ritual would appeal to Yeats, who thought that the "magical practices" of poetry would "create or reveal a single mind, a single energy"—like this poem's collective narrator.

Whether borrowing a voice from the past or creating a kind of chorus to record shared experience, Curdy's poems seek to widen the reader's sense of self by finding room for several selves, real and imagined, within a single mind. Despite their deceptive modesty, they include multitudes. ■

Nick Ripatrazone *is the author of two books of poetry and a book of literary criticism,* The Fine Delight. *He teaches English at a public school in New Jersey.*

The Crewcut

Brian Doyle

CNS PHOTO / RICK MUSACCHIO, *TENNESSEE REGISTER*

One day in elementary school a boy on the playground punched a nun in the belly. His name was Billy and her name was Marie. It was an accident. She had come running to break up a fight and Billy had swung at his opponent with his eyes closed because the other boy was bigger and older and Billy was scared, and Sister had tossed the other boy out of the way like a leaf just as Billy's fist arrived where her womb was. She gasped and doubled over and Billy opened his eyes and burst into tears. This was shocking because Billy was burly and we had never seen him cry, even when the bigger older boy had punched him so savagely in the shoulder that Billy had a bruise for a month, which I can attest to because he and I played shirts-and-skins basketball and I saw it snarl under his skin and change colors and slowly die like a painful memory.

Sister was only bent double for a few seconds, but in those few seconds her veil slipped forward so that when she stood up again it fell off. A boy named Kevin picked it up and handed it to her. We all stared at her crewcut. Nobody said anything. There was dust on Sister's veil—I remember that. She seemed to be crying. Billy was still crying also. The bigger older boy tried to edge away but a few smaller boys grabbed him and held on. Sister told him to report to the principal this very minute and then she said to Billy you come with me young man and they went off together, Sister with her arm on his shoulders like he was her little brother and they were going to the Mets game or something. Her veil was unbalanced so she looked jaunty or weekendish, as our dad said of people who wore their hats cocked or askew. He himself wore a fedora to work in the city during the week but never on the weekend because he said hats were forms of disguise or costume and there was no need to indulge in theatrics on the weekend, and besides Jesus Christ Himself never wore a hat on the weekend so why should he?

Years later I was having tea one morning with my mom and dad and I told them about this moment on the playground. That poor child, said my mother. I said that Billy recovered right quick and ended up being a fireman for the city, and she said, no, no, I mean Sister Marie, and not the violence but the veil. To have lost that even for a moment in front of you children was to have lost something crucial. Poor child. She would have been in her twenties, you know. Still creating herself. Still trying to be a presence. And suddenly she wasn't. In that terrible gravel playground no less. I remember that damned playground all too well. You all have pebbles embedded in your knees to this day from that damned playground. That poor child.

And to be struck in the one place that she would have thought about a thousand times, said my dad quietly, stirring his tea. People think it is about celibacy but from what I understand of those who give their lives in spiritual service it is much more about loneliness. Imagine as you say yes with immense joy you know you are also saying no forever to the quickening of life in your belly. Imagine knowing that you would never have children of your own but would have to find glints and hints of your own sons and daughters among strange children. Imagine that even the children you were able to love as a teacher or a nurse would never be the children you would see burning toast in the morning or falling asleep in the car on the way home from the beach.

And we did imagine that, the three of us, in silence, at the old ash table, stirring our tea. After a while my mother said: We always took them for granted and we still do, don't we? The poor girls. So very much the best of us, weren't they? Aren't they? And my dad said absolutely so, that's absolutely so. ■

Brian Doyle *is the editor of* Portland *magazine at the University of Portland.*

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