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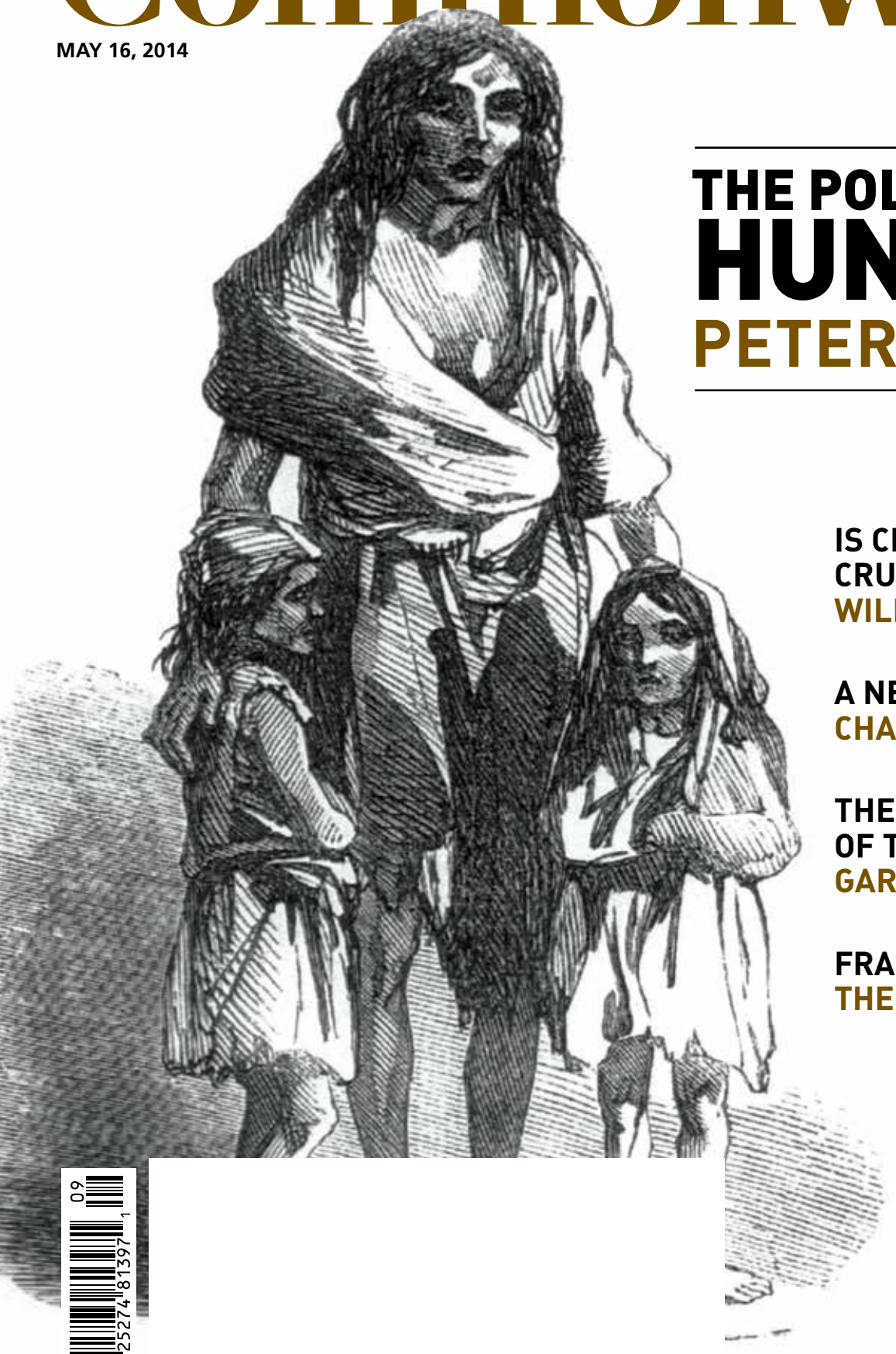
Commonweal

MAY 16, 2014



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A NEW GILDED AGE
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LAST WORD

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LETTERS

Fact or fiction? Burke v. Paine, etc.

TRUTH BEEN TOLD?

After reading Kaitlin Campbell's "Sister's All Right" (April 11), I noted that the author is your marketing coordinator. Is this a true story or a work of fiction—a very good work of fiction? I have been carrying it around since I first read it.

All the more convincing if a true story, truly and truthfully told. Kudos. Either way, let's have more from Campbell in future issues.

JOE FRATTALI
Dahlonega, Ga.

THE AUTHOR REPLIES

Thanks for the kind words. What I wrote did happen, and similar things have happened to many women. A woman on the subway once told me, "If a guy tries to do that, don't be polite. Just go crazy." Sometimes it's easier to pretend to be someone else than to pretend to go crazy.

KAITLIN CAMPBELL

THE TYRANNY OF FACTIONS

George Scialabba's review of Yuval Levin's book on the world of Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine ("Who Decides?" April 11) ignores an important insight that Burke shared with our country's founding fathers, and which they put into practice in our form of government. Paine had argued that a political representative should mirror the interests and beliefs of his constituents, and should act to further those interests—as they, rather than he, saw them. Burke, in contrast, thought that intelligent voters should elect a man of quality who would best be capable of reasoning through unanticipated future situations and applying his experience and wisdom in pursuit of the common good. Our founding fathers hedged their bets, with a House of Representatives (à la Paine) and a Senate (à la Burke). Consistent with their views as expressed in pamphlets collected in the Federalist Papers, the founding fathers were fiercely opposed to "factions" (political parties) because of their inhibitory effect on the individual representative's ability to vote his conscience. The tide of that battle turned with the ascent of Thomas Jefferson, and it was lost with the election of Andrew Jackson. Had more institutional protections been inserted to protect individual congresspersons against the tyranny of "factious partisans," our country would have developed an even "more perfect union" than the one we have inherited under our Constitution.

WILLIAM ROCHE BRONNER
Brooklyn, N.Y.

PROPHETIC EXAMPLE

I enjoyed reading Melissa Matthes's review of Kim Philip Hansen's book *Military Chaplains and Religious Diversity* ("Non-prophetic Ministry," March 21). Matthes highlighted the difficulty of being a prophetic employee. Chaplains have the difficult task of walking the tightrope between Army employee and spiritual minister. A great example of a person who did both successfully was Fr. Edson Wood, OSA, whose photograph was included with the piece. Seeing the photo of Fr. Wood took me back to my days as a West Point cadet. Fr. Wood was a fine Augustinian priest who encouraged me

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From the Editors

Style & Substance

Thanks to the popularity of Pope Francis and his decision to canonize John XXIII and John Paul II at the same time, the news about Catholicism has been focused with even more intensity than usual on the papacy. The popular media tends to reduce the church to either the romance or the scandal of the popes. In either case, the coverage is often breathless. Yet whatever one thinks about the papacy—whether one sees it as an anachronism or as a guarantor of the Gospel's integrity—there is no doubt that a remarkable succession of gifted men has occupied the chair of Peter in recent decades. If they were not all saints, they were undeniably men of rare spiritual authority. And Francis—who likes to identify himself not as a priest or bishop but as "a sinner"—appears to be cut from the same sturdy cloth.

Francis's penchant for seemingly off-the-cuff remarks ("Who am I to judge?") and his determination to shed much of the papacy's regal trappings have made him a hero to many, while raising suspicion among some traditionalists. What seems increasingly clear, however, is that Francis has taken the reform mandate given him by the conclave that elected him and run with it. He also wants to place the mercy of the Gospel, rather than its strictures, front and center. This has made him immensely appealing to both Catholics and those outside the church, but it remains to be seen if this more conciliatory style of governance will help overcome the church's internal divisions.

Despite official denials from the Vatican, there is little doubt that Francis's decision to canonize John XXIII and John Paul II at the same time is part of a broader effort to reconcile warring factions within Catholicism. This aim was manifest in Francis's homily during the canonization Mass, where he boldly enlisted the legacies of his two predecessors in support of his upcoming Synod on the Family. Pope John was open to and guided by the Holy Spirit in an unprecedented way, Francis noted, while John Paul II wanted to be remembered as "the pope of the family." Shrewdly uniting these complementary visions, Francis insisted that the upcoming synod would be "open to the Holy Spirit in pastoral service to the family."

In calling the synod, Francis has raised the expectation that the church will readmit divorced and remarried Catholics to Communion. This in turn has heightened the fears of some that Francis will alter church doctrine on the indissolubility of marriage. Certainly the pope's call for "pastoral service" and "divine mercy" suggests that he thinks this is an issue where the church has erred on the side of legalism, and he ended his homily by characteristically urging the synod to embrace the "mystery" of God's infinite forgiveness.

Francis is equally engaged on other fronts. Reform of the Vatican bank and the financial operations of the Curia are well underway. Preparations for the upcoming synod indicate that Francis hopes to make good on the Second Vatican Council's promise of episcopal collegiality. Bishops are being encouraged to speak their minds and consult with the laity. Similarly, Francis's appointments of cardinals and bishops have shown a preference for those with pastoral or diplomatic experience. He has famously remarked that he wants shepherds who smell of their sheep, and the sacking of the German Bishop Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst, known as the "Bishop of Bling," has sent an unmistakable message in that regard. Many are now wondering if Francis will move with similar dispatch against bishops who have covered up the sexual abuse of children.

Paul Vallely, the author of *Pope Francis: Untying the Knots*, and the *Boston Globe*'s John Allen were recently at the Ethics and Public Policy Center's Faith Angle Forum to assess the first year of Francis's pontificate. Both seasoned journalists dismissed the notion that Francis is pursuing fundamental doctrinal change. The pope's real agenda, shaped by his experience as Jesuit provincial and archbishop in Argentina, is consonant with both the letter and the spirit of Vatican II. "One thing he's concerned about," Vallely explained, "is that the church doesn't make decisions in the right way, and that is more important to him than what the decisions are." Both Vallely and Allen agree that, with Francis, style is substance. "You can change the Catholic Church profoundly without changing a single comma in its official code of teaching," Allen said. "These gestures are not just spontaneous, and they're not one-off. They're a program of governance in miniature."

The most profound changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council were not essentially doctrinal. Rather, change had to do with how the church presented itself and its teachings to both the faithful and the larger world. By rejecting condemnations and anathemas, embracing other Christians and those of other faiths, and opening a dialogue with modernity, the council transformed the church without altering its fundamental message or character. Francis will need all the spiritual authority of his office if his welcome style of governance is to bring to fruition the transformation initiated by the council. ■

Fr. Nonomen

Fr. Bulldozer

WHEN NEW PASTORS CHANGE TOO MUCH TOO SOON

Every parish priest I know keeps a junk drawer in the sacristy. It's usually long and narrow and built into the vesting counter, a great place to keep cough drops, an extra handkerchief, or the notes for your homily, a place to stash a spare battery for the cordless microphone. These drawers never have locks because nothing really valuable is ever in them. Yet there is an unwritten code among clergy that you never open or rifle through someone else's junk drawer.

I recently heard about a new pastor who violated that code. Within two weeks of being assigned to the parish, he reinstituted the ringing of bells during the consecration, recarpeted the entire rectory, and painted a wooden statue of Mary bright blue. Most shocking, he cleaned out his fellow priest's junk drawer without warning or permission, while the priest was still living in and working at the parish. It was bad form and went a long way toward promoting staff anarchy.

I wish he were an exception to the rule, but more and more I get an earful about how Fr. Bulldozer walked in on day one and began making sweeping changes. What has happened to patience and gentleness? What happened to showing sensitivity to a community in transition? This sort of wisdom used to be passed down around rectory dining tables from older, respected, experienced clerics. Perhaps first-time pastors are now so young that there just isn't time to "season" them properly. Or is this yet another example of the know-it-all clericalism of some coming fresh out of seminary?

I suspect it's a little of all these things, and there is no easy antidote. I can, however, offer a bit of wisdom gleaned from the field, wisdom that I would confidently (and using my very best Barry Fitzgerald impression!) pass on to a tableful of young priests.

First, you may well be the new pastor, but it's not really your parish yet. There are many families who have celebrated or grieved through major life events in that church. Parishioners have emotional attachments that reach back generations. You're the new kid on the block. Respect that there was a living tradition going on long before you started parking there.

Second, ask to hear parishioners' stories. That will go a long way in gaining trust from a community that is trying to appraise its new leader. More important, listening will deepen your knowledge of the ties that knit together any parish. You will learn, for example, that the hideous, gore-nographic statue of St. Sebastian in the vestibule was a gift from the Brown family when they lost a child, which is why no one ever suggests moving it. Encourage the People of God to speak, because their stories are the spiritual brick and mortar of the place.

Next, make no changes at all for at least a year. This is the best advice I was ever given and the hardest advice I've ever tried to follow. At one parish, I stared at a plastic rose lying on the altar for a year! It was placed there in memory of all the unborn lost to abortion. It was large and pink and utterly distracting, but I made friends with it because it meant something to many in the parish. Any change made too soon by the new guy—no matter how minor or liturgically correct—will be perceived as a criticism either of the previous pastor (who could walk on water, never spent a dime, and changed his own oil) or of the entire community (who, during this transition period, are grieving). It's much easier to go slowly at first than to repair a reputation of disregard.

Barry Fitzgerald and Bing Crosby in Going My Way

Finally, educate, educate, educate! This means a lot more than books and classes on Christology. Share a good article you've read by making it available at the entrance to the church. Use the bulletin to reveal some details of your own life and your view on things. The congregation wants to know a bit more about you beyond how you preside at Mass or preach. Conversations on the sidewalk after Mass, the way new families are welcomed, the music selections at liturgies, even the manner in which the parish phone is answered are all part of that educational process. Being consistent in these small matters promotes a parish identity that will eventually replace the "This is how we've always done things" attitude that confronts every new pastor.

A new pastor walks a fine line between learning about a parish community and making necessary administrative decisions. It takes time and balance and a lot of prayer. Have patience and trust. With a little luck, you'll soon be filling up your own junk drawer. And after that, people might start asking why that distracting rose is on the altar. Even better, they might suggest removing it—while proposing five new parish ministries that, for whatever reason, were previously neglected. ■

Fr. Nonomen *is the pastor of a suburban parish. He has been a priest for more than twenty years.*

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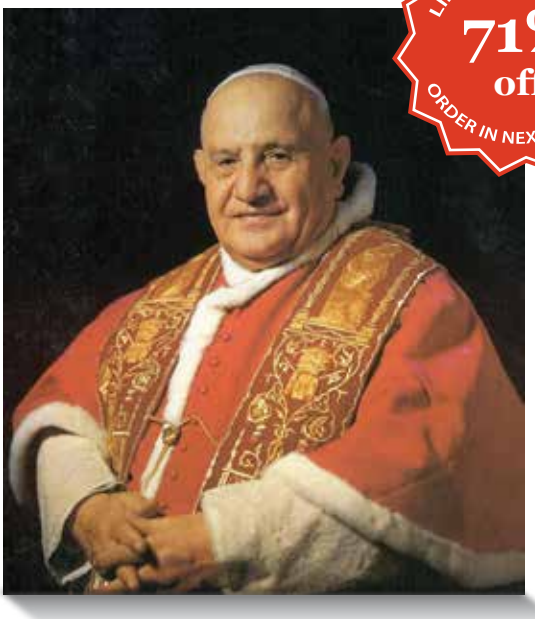

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Charles R. Morris

The Future of Inequality

THE PAST AS PROLOGUE

According to the French economist Thomas Piketty, income inequality in the United States is now "probably higher than in any other society at any time in the past, anywhere in the world." The concentration of U.S. *capital*, as opposed to income, is not as great as in pre–World War I Great Britain—the world of the first season of *Downton Abbey*—but taking income and capital together, the United States is now about as unequal as Belle Époque Europe. Indeed, according to Piketty's data, we now take the laurels as the most inegalitarian nation in the world, and on current trends may soon become the most inegalitarian nation in history—this from a country that invented progressive income and wealth taxation and whose founding documents are a celebration of the common citizen.

In America, Piketty is best known for partnering with Berkeley's Emmanuel Saez to produce annual reports on the eye-popping income shares of the top-tier U.S. earners. He has devoted his career to studying the metamorphosis of wealth and capital over the past couple of centuries, and has now synthesized his research in an important book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Harvard), which paints a compelling, and scary, picture of the deep forces driving toward ever greater inequality in the modern world.

Piketty's historical focus adds power to his analysis of the trend toward greater financial inequality today. Through much of history, extreme inequality was the normal condition. In Jane Austen's England, the stock of capital (land, tools, livestock, houses, and anything else that could produce income) was between six and seven times annual national income, and its ownership was extremely concentrated. By the time of the first *Downton Abbey* episodes, the top 10 percent of British households held about 90 percent of all wealth, with 50–60 percent controlled by just the top 1 percent of households.

Between Austen's day and that of *Downton Abbey*, the nature of capital changed quite dramatically, with land declining in importance relative to industrial capital. But returns were remarkably consistent—over the very long term, capital returned about 5 percent annually. In both France and England, the wealthy grew accustomed to speaking of their annual returns rather than their wealth. Austen's Mr. Darcy was known to dispose of £10,000 a year, so Mrs. Bennett knew immediately that he had an estate worth an eyebrow-raising £200,000. Balzac's characters spoke in much the same terms, automatically multiplying income by twenty to estimate someone's fortune.

The last Gilded Age: John D. Rockefeller and son

Although the data in the rest of Europe are not as complete as in England and France, that basic distributional profile seems to have obtained in all the advanced countries. Over the course of the nineteenth century, annual world economic growth was about 1.5 percent, although there was almost no inflation. Since populations were increasing, per capita growth was substantially lower. The stock of capital, however, was typically six to seven times bigger than annual national income. Almost all of that capital was held by the richest citizens, and earned steady 4 to 5 percent returns. Those returns, on such a large bolus of wealth, combined with slow economic growth, virtually guaranteed that the rich could only get richer, while the laboring classes were steadily immiserated. Marx got that part right.

For much of the nineteenth century, the United States was different. It was growing faster than almost anywhere else, and as a young country, its richest families did not yet command fortunes on the scale of the English and French grandees. Still, inequality of both wealth and income grew rapidly after the Civil War, and by the eve of World War I, the richest tenth of Americans controlled about 80 percent of capital, and the richest 1 percent controlled about 45 percent, not yet at the European norm but on a converging track. Still, the United States was considerably more egalitarian than France or England. Rapid economic growth and innovations like universal education ensured that labor was not falling hopelessly behind. In the last quarter

of the nineteenth century, the ratio of capital to national income in the United States was only about four to one, and it took until the end of the 1920s to reach five to one.

The one-two-three punch of World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II destroyed the old regimes everywhere, along with much of their physical and human capital. In the wake of the Second World War, discredited oligarchies were swept away by socialist and other left-of-center parties. Confiscatory taxes were imposed on wealth, on estates, and on high incomes. Industrial and financial corporations were subjected to stringent regulation, while newly empowered unions gained fairer splits of business revenues.

The results were dramatic. The ratio of capital holdings to national income dropped from just under seven to one in both Britain and France to less than three to one, a tidal change. In the United States the change was more modest, from five to one to just under four to one, with the difference explained in part by the much greater physical destruction in Europe. As reconstruction got underway, very rapid growth further tilted the field toward labor. In 1950s France, high growth allowed workers to increase their share of the national income at the expense of the capitalists—a first in the record of post-Revolution France. The French still refer to the postwar era as the *Trente Glorieuses*, or the "Thirty Glorious" years.

It was also a golden age in America. For thirty years after the war, U.S. incomes moved in proportional lockstep: all five income quintiles enjoyed approximately the same rate of income increases, with a small advantage in the lower quintiles. Economists like Simon Kuznets and Robert Solow showed that balanced growth was a central tendency of the American economy. Barring catastrophe, the pattern of equitable division of the economic pie would continue indefinitely. And in America, more than in Europe, individuals of ability and grit could readily move up the quintiles—or move down if they didn't have the right stuff.

Then came the Thatcher-Reagan revolution. (Piketty speculates that both the United States and England, which still viewed itself as a world hyperpower, were shaken by the rapid modernization on the European continent and in Japan.) Whatever the reason, for two decades they moved in lockstep to strip away the postwar reforms that had reined in the power of the wealthy. Taxes on upper-bracket incomes, investment returns, and estates were drastically reduced. Financial regulations were gutted, and leverage soared.

Especially in the United States, ballooning executive pay drove the vast expansion in the wealth of the top 1 percent. Business spokespeople, of course, claim that the pay is merit-based. But there is no clear statistical relationship between pay levels and performance, and corporate pay outside the United States is typically far lower, without apparent negative consequences. France, Germany, and Japan have managed decent economic performance—although each has had its ups and downs, just as the United States has—while staying much closer to their postwar income distribution profiles.

Piketty proposes a number of reforms—most particularly a graduated annual tax on capital. Even an apparently low top rate, like 5 percent, would be highly progressive since the stock of capital is so much bigger than annual national income, and the same capital would be subjected to taxation each year. Realistically, there is no chance of such reforms, if only because the very rich so thoroughly outgun reformers in Washington, and because Congress itself is becoming a rich man's club.

But perhaps we can take heart from the experience of Jane Austen's England. The "rotten borough" system gave the stagnant land-owning class near-complete dominance of the British political system. It took a century, but a persistent reform movement steadily whittled away at the power of the great lords, until it was relatively inconsequential. One hopes that we can do better than that. ■

John E. Thiel

Parallel Magisterium?

WHY THEOLOGY IS NOT A THREAT

In recent years, both the Committee on Doctrine of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith have censured the writings of Catholic theologians, judging them to be not in conformity with authoritative church teaching. In a 2011 "statement" on Sr. Elizabeth Johnson's book *Quest for the Living God* (2007) and in a 2012 "notification" on Sr. Margaret Farley's book *Just Love* (2006) the Committee on Doctrine and the CDF respectively concluded that theological positions advocated in those works deviate from church doctrine and do not reflect authentic Catholic theology.

The reasoning behind those judgments, and the fact that the bishops' censure set the Catechism of the Catholic Church as the standard from which Johnson and Farley were alleged to have deviated, led many theologians to complain that the bishops were conflating theology with catechesis. Theology is exploratory by its nature, bringing the truth of revelation to bear on contemporary culture and considering new ways in which that truth can be conceptualized and expressed. Moreover, the doctrine of the church—what Catholics regard as its sacred tradition—can develop in unanticipated ways over time, and theological reflection has always been a crucial ingredient in that development, as theologians ask the church to consider how changes in Catholic belief, including dramatic ones, might stand in continuity with the age-old faith. If theologians are condemned for not being in conformity with the Catechism, how can they offer judgments about such developments? How, in this important regard, can they do theology at all? Bishops who reduce theology to catechesis, the complaining theologians assert, fail to grasp what theology is.

Cardinal Donald Wuerl, who presided over the Johnson case as then-chair of the USCCB doctrine committee, rejects this interpretation. In a September 2011 article in *America*, Wuerl insisted that "when bishops individually or collectively disagree with a specific theological position or methodology, it is not because they do not understand the task of theology." On the contrary, Wuerl argued, the failure in understanding lies on the side of theologians who think that authentic Catholic theology can ever deviate from the teaching of the magisterium. Following the CDF's censure of Farley, Richard Gaillardetz wrote in *America* (September 24, 2012) that theology properly includes a "critical exploratory function" that may "yield insights for a development or even a substantive change in the teaching [of the magisterium]." Wuerl responded in *America* in February 2013, asserting that only the hierarchy can guarantee "that the authoritative teachers of the faith will not lead us into error and away from Christ," and that "no one else can rightfully make that claim." Theologians who think that their work can lead to substantive change in church teaching are misguided, Wuerl argued. "Such an approach to theology inevitably bestows on theological work the aura, at times even the explicit declaration, of a 'parallel magisterium,' one that has the competence not simply to deepen our understanding of the faith, but to graft onto it teachings extraneous to the deposit of faith that Jesus entrusted to the church as its steward."

Here we see a fundamental disagreement about the nature of theology, its appropriate task, and how it is properly responsible to the church. Looking into this disagreement can help us understand better the tension between bishops and theologians that has prevailed since the Second Vatican Council—itself a paradigm of cooperation between bishops and theologians in the formulation of church teachings.

Wuerl's response to Gaillardetz shifts the discussion in a revealing way. When Gaillardetz highlights theology's occasionally creative role in the development of tradition, Wuerl responds by talking about the magisterial authority of bishops. He seems concerned that Gaillardetz's position, which a large majority of Catholic theologians holds, challenges that authority, construing theological reflection as a "'parallel magisterium'"—parallel, that is, to the authentic magisterium of bishops. In his view, the understanding of Catholic theology shared by many theologians usurps by its very nature the teaching authority of the hierarchy, since it assumes that theologians teach in the church, and *to* the church, with the same authority as bishops.

Let's parse this neuralgic issue in hopes of clarifying the respective roles of bishops and theologians. We should begin by agreeing with Wuerl that the authority of bishops as teachers be duly recognized. It is simply a basic Catholic belief that the bishops, as successors of the apostles, possess a charism, a gift of the Holy Spirit, which ensures that their teaching truthfully hands down the deposit of faith. The bishops possess a unique authority that other believers, including theologians, cannot claim.

Amid the suspicion with which traditional authority is viewed today across all institutions, the effective exercise of episcopal authority in a hierarchical church is surely no easy task. Given such difficulties, one sympathizes with Wuerl's concern that the authentic authority of the magisterium be recognized and respected. Yet in my thirty-five years as a theologian, I have never met a Catholic theologian who claimed or aspired to magisterial authority. My experience tells me that Wuerl's concern about a parallel magisterium

is unfounded. His concern springs, I believe, from his assumption that theologians should echo the teaching of their bishops in every respect. Such a belief runs counter to the understanding of a large majority of Catholic theologians—namely, that theological research offers the church new ways of imagining the continuity of tradition, and thus the deposit of faith.

Why do so many Catholic theologians hold this view? The answer lies partly in the fact that some teachings that bishops regard as the deposit of faith in a certain historical moment, like ours, may not be so judged in the faith of the church of the future. This possibility is more likely when large numbers of the faithful no longer believe in the long-standing teaching. Take, for example, the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that eternal salvation is open to "those who without any fault do not know anything about Christ or his church, yet who search for God with a sincere heart" (*Lumen Gentium*, 16). This conciliar teaching, which issued from the work of such liberal theologians as Yves Congar and Karl Rahner, dramatically changed the earlier teaching of the Council of Florence (1438–45) that "all those who are outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans but also Jews or heretics and schismatics, cannot share in eternal life and will go *into the everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels* (Matt 25:41), unless they are joined to the Catholic Church before the end of their lives." Another example of the church reconfiguring an abiding understanding of tradition lies in Vatican II's teaching that the human person has a right to religious freedom. The council fathers insisted that this new doctrine, cultivated through the groundbreaking work of the theologian John Courtney Murray, SJ, was implicit in divine revelation and so truly reflected the age-old faith, even though it reversed the long-standing teaching on this matter—a teaching that had been viewed as part of the deposit of faith. The council fathers justified this new configuration by noting that the church "examines the sacred tradition and teaching of the church from which it continually draws new insights in harmony with the old" (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 1).

Theologians know that many church doctrines, even central ones, came to clarity in just this manner—through ardent theological reflection over time, and with the eventual approval of the bishops. They understand that what today is judged to be the deposit of faith, even as it is expressed in the Catechism, may not be in the future. At times, theological reflection engages the possibility of doctrinal development to assist the whole church, including the bishops, in considering the mystery of the ongoing guidance, action, and correction of the Holy Spirit over time. In this key task, theologians are teachers, too.

In his eloquent 2011 letter "Bishops as Teachers," Wuerl praises the collaborative relationship between bishops and theologians, noting that "bishops benefit from the work of

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Washington Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl (front) with other U.S. cardinals, waiting for a bus in Rome

theologians, while theologians gain a deeper understanding of revelation under the guidance of the magisterium." Yet he again seems to reject the notion that theologians may legitimately propose new understandings of the apostolic tradition; indeed, his remarks suggest that the present-day understanding of the deposit of faith will endure forever in every detail.

Theologians, for their part, embrace the role of bishops as teachers and accept their authority as the official conservers of sacred tradition. But theologians also have a teaching responsibility, one shaped by their knowledge of how the tradition actually evolved over time—in part through the efforts of theologians. Most theologians believe that *nearly* all the doctrines that comprise the deposit of faith, as catalogued in the Catechism, will never change; indeed, the heart of that doctrine is expressed in the words of the Nicene Creed, which Catholics have professed at every Sabbath liturgy for centuries. Yet theologians, like many other believers, recognize that not *every* aspect of magisterial teaching remains unchanged over time. Some theologians view current condemnations of artificial contraception or same-sex relationships as prime examples of teachings that may develop in the future.

When theologians raise issues and offer proposals concerning such teachings, they are not declaring or exercising a rival, "parallel" magisterium. The resort to such charges reveals a high level of anxiety on the part of bishops about their own status—an anxiety that, quite frankly, damages the real authority bishops possess. Bishops enjoy that authority

by virtue of their office, in which they are graciously assisted by the Holy Spirit. And yet, given the Catholic belief that our own will must cooperate with grace toward the attainment of the good, the authority of the magisterium must still be practiced well in order to be secured in the church. I suggest that such good practice requires of the magisterium a greater openness to the proposals that theologians offer.

I agree wholeheartedly with Cardinal Wuerl that bishops have an obligation to act on their special authority as teachers—and that doing so might entail, from time to time, the censure of a particular theological position. But when theologians make proposals regarding a church teaching that many believers find questionable, and that may currently be in a state of development, using the Catechism as the criterion of theological legitimacy is simply not helpful. In such a situation, judging a theological position as not in accordance with the Catechism merely tells us something we already know. Worse, as the bishops' critics have said, such criticism conflates the roles of bishops and theologians, restricting theologians to reiterations of already-established expressions of the faith and barring them from exploring possible developments in doctrine. Had theologians throughout Catholic history refused to push beyond the received formulations, little would ever have changed in church teaching, and as a result we would not possess the extensive and rich body of doctrine that is one of the glories of the tradition.

It is important for all to understand that there can be no rival to the teaching authority of bishops. Yet it is just as important for bishops not to cast theology's tentative efforts to reflect in new ways on the divine mystery and the Spirit's presence to the People of God as a rivalry with the episcopacy. Perhaps we find here a dimension of the truth of Pope Francis's recent observation that "we should not even think…that 'thinking with the church' means only thinking with the hierarchy of the church." To be sure, theology is not doctrine; but at crucial junctures throughout the church's history it has contributed to the *making* of doctrine, in surprising and fruitful ways. Theologians are teachers in the church. Through their knowledge of the tradition they support the bishops in communicating Catholic truth, in all its beautiful variety, to the church and to the world. But they also exercise their responsibility as teachers by offering careful consideration of new construals of the faith that may, with time and the approval of the magisterium, eventually constitute the church's faith. Throughout the church's history such theological creativity has redounded to the church's great benefit—and though it can seem confusing or even threatening, its capacity to assist the church in understanding its saving truth is a blessing. ■

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Hollis Phelps

A Degree in Debt

THE HIGH PRICE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The institution at which I teach is located in an economically depressed region of eastern North Carolina. A good number of my students come from families that in the best of times just manage to scrape by each month, though the past few years really haven't been the best of times. Some of them aren't even that lucky, and consistently face much worse economic constraints. Simply put, many of my students are, by any reasonable measure, poor or just above the poverty line. If they had to rely on their own resources, they would probably never be able to gain a higher education.

That's where student loans come in. The federal government began guaranteeing student loans offered through non-profit and private lenders as part of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA). A component of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society domestic agenda, HEA was aimed at strengthening the resources of colleges and universities. The legislation increased federal funding for higher education and made available various forms of financial assistance for students, including low-interest student loans. As Johnson noted upon its signing, the HEA would allow "a high school senior anywhere in this great land of ours [to] apply to any college or any university in any of the fifty states and not be turned away because his family is poor." Johnson hoped the legislation would level the playing field, providing to those without means a way "to deeper personal fulfillment, greater personal productivity, and increased personal reward." And as a bonus, a more educated citizenry would "allow us to maintain our freedom in a highly competitive world."

Although in 2010 the federal government stopped guaranteeing loans issued by private and nonprofit lenders and instead became the direct lender for all government-backed student loans, the logic and intent remain the same: to put a college education in reach for those who don't have the money to pay for it out of pocket. Many of my students fall into this category, and they aren't alone. About two-thirds of students enrolled in four-year colleges and universities nationwide take on student loans to help pay for their education.

Many students wouldn't be able to attend college at all without easy access to loans. But that so many students have to borrow has much to do with the cost of attending. Although the figures vary, over the past thirty years the real cost of attending a four-year institution has at least tripled, far outpacing inflation. Because of increases in tuition, grants and scholarships don't go as far as they used to. Combine that with family income levels, which have been stagnant since the 1970s, and it's no surprise that the

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average student now graduates from college with $29,400 of debt; 38 million Americans now hold a combined total of more than $1 trillion in student-loan debt. That's four times what it was ten years ago, and it surpasses total U.S. credit-card debt. In fact, when it comes to what Americans owe, student-loan debt is second only to mortgage debt.

Prior to 1976, student loans could be discharged through bankruptcy relatively easily. The establishment of the U.S. Bankruptcy Code in 1978 placed limitations on the ability to discharge student-loan debt, and over time the law has evolved and narrowed. Currently, most student loans in most circumstances are excepted from discharge. The Federal Student Aid office of the U.S. Department of Education notes that the discharge of student loans through bankruptcy happens only "in rare cases." In those cases, the borrower at the very least must demonstrate that he or she has made a good-faith effort, usually for a minimum of five years, to repay the loan but that continued repayment would mean an inability to maintain a minimal standard of living over a significant portion of the repayment period. Few make it this far, which partly explains why at least 10 percent of recent borrowers are currently in default—the highest rate in almost twenty years.

When confronted with such facts, politicians, the media, business leaders, and the student-loan industry typically respond by stressing the importance of individual responsibility in borrowing. True, we might hear half-hearted calls to rein in the cost of tuition, but mainly we hear scolding reminders about how planning in advance, choosing an affordable school, working part time, and good old-fashioned belt-tightening can help one avoid a mountain of debt after graduation. Jack Remondi, the CEO of Sallie Mae, the nation's largest servicer of federally backed loans and provider of private loans, has said that unmanageable student-loan debt is largely the result of "poor planning." Over-borrowing can be avoided, Remondi has emphasized, by putting in place a "plan that takes into consideration what your income potential is going to be when you graduate and what that debt burden is going to be." In other words, the sticker price of a college education and the necessity of going into debt in order to pay for it are largely taken for granted. Lacking any real alternative, so the thinking goes, it's up to the borrower and the borrower's parents to come up with a long-term strategy for managing the unavoidable debt that comes with higher education.

My students, who sometimes graduate with double the average debt, aren't necessarily poor planners or irresponsible borrowers misinformed about the debt they are taking on to finance their college education. They just come from homes that couldn't afford to put money into a college savings account. They've chosen for various reasons to attend a college that is one of the more reasonable options in the state, but still costs $17,300 a year for tuition alone. They already have part-time jobs, but $7.25 an hour, which is the current minimum wage in North Carolina, doesn't make much of a dent in current tuition rates. They know what it means to tighten their belts, since they've done so all their lives. In other words, my students are painfully aware of the amount of debt they are taking on and the consequences: they expect many years of sacrifice in other areas of their lives to repay with interest the cost of their degree. One of my current students has told me that she understands what it means to be "indebted for life."

Another student of mine, who graduated last spring (I'll call her Jackie), grew up in a single-parent household whose income averaged about $21,000 a year. She relied on student loans to fund her education, but during her last year and a half of enrollment she also worked thirty to forty hours a week, while taking a full course load. Degree earned, Jackie owes $45,000 in student debt. She hasn't been able to find a stable, well-paying job, so she works as a server

in a restaurant, which doesn't pay much. After her student loan payment, rent, bills, and groceries last month, she had $1.87 left. Her car is on its last legs, but she can't afford a new one. Nor can she afford much else. She'd like to go to graduate school to improve her financial prospects, but she doesn't see how that is possible, given her current situation.

Another student of mine told me: "I am in a position where I have to take out loans in order to go to college. Period. I have no other option." In a cruel twist, the very means undertaken by my students to get themselves out of poverty threatens to continue that poverty through the debt that they now owe. The massive amount of debt that Jackie and many of my other students have to take on has little to do with "poor planning." These students haven't been able to plan at all, which is part of what it means to be poor.

Students like Jackie, and so many others, are in a bind. They've been told over and over that the safest, most reliable way to guarantee a secure, well-paying job is to get a college education. Teachers, parents, ministers, elected officials, business leaders—all constantly reinforce the notion that higher education is critical for ensuring one's earning potential and overall happiness. It's how President Johnson framed the HEA, and it's become an article of faith at every level of private and public discourse.

The message isn't entirely wrong, at least given current social and economic conditions. It's difficult to measure well-being, of course, but it remains the case that on average those with a bachelor's degree make at least 50 percent more money than those with only a high-school diploma. That wage gap will likely increase as, we are regularly told, the economy increasingly requires more educated, highly skilled workers. The message is clear: Get a college degree, or face a lifetime of precarious and meaningless low-wage work.

There's a larger imperative as well, tied to the strength of the nation as a whole. As President Obama has said: "The kinds of opportunities that are open to you will be determined by how far you go in school. In other words, the farther you go in school, the farther you'll go in life. And at a time when other countries are competing with us like never before, when students around the world are working harder than ever, your success in school will also help determine America's success in the twenty-first century."

But such rhetoric rings hollow alongside lectures about individual responsibility, which moralize an economic problem. Moreover, the shifting of responsibility onto the individual borrower conceals the fact that student loan debt is, in one way or another, a highly profitable business. The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that the federal government stands to make $175 billion in profit from interest on student loans over the next decade, and profits for loan servicers and private lenders have continued to rise. Investors and speculators are also in on the action, as student-loan debts, like risky mortgages, are bundled and sold as securities in financial markets. For instance, in 2012 Sallie Mae sold $13.8 billion worth of such securities. Though that is a far cry from the trillions of dollars of mortgage-backed securities that ultimately tanked the global economy in 2007 and '08, the *Wall Street Journal* has reported that investors want more, with demand as much as fifteen times greater than supply. That supply will likely increase as student-loan servicers and issuers seek to leverage new capital for hungry investors.

And this doesn't even take into account all the other industries that benefit indirectly from student debt, such as test-prep companies, textbook publishers and suppliers, and technology servicers and providers. Then there are the schools themselves, many of which would likely cease to exist in their current forms without the possibility of large student loans. My own institution would probably fold within a year or two if our students didn't have access to these loans.

In this sense, the system functions the same way our current health-care system does: it's a complicated market composed of numerous actors that operate at various levels to sell a product that people desperately need. Opting out of either system isn't really much of an option, and people will go to great lengths, including taking on exorbitant debt, to have access to them. All the while, those who run the systems profit from our needs and anxieties.

As a business strategy, however, it's shortsighted. Although student debt is certainly profitable, there's good reason to think that it may negatively affect the economy in the long term. Money spent on repayment is money that can't be spent elsewhere, and large amounts of individual debt may limit the ability to participate in some of the very activities that drive the economy, such as home ownership. Moreover, excessive student debt often forces people to play it safe, rather than take the risks that entrepreneurship—another key driver of economic growth—requires. High monthly student-loan payments require a reliable income, and leave little room for the unpredictability and insecurity that initially accompany most innovation. The potential overall drain on the economy explains why the Education Department has begun a more serious effort to inform borrowers of their repayment options, such as the income-based repayment plan. The latter ties one's monthly payments to income, which may lower the payments. But it does so at the expense of extending the life of the loan, meaning that the total amount owed increases. Such strategies may provide short-term relief, but they don't seem to be long-term solutions to a worsening problem.

It's bad enough that a college education is so expensive. But the toll exacted by the extra burden of excessive student debt, especially on those already poor, threatens the common good. If our educational system is ever to be just, we must find an alternative to the current way of paying for it, which leaves the already poor crippled with decades of debt. ■

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Mark of Belonging

Why Circumcision Is No Crime

William A. Galston

A decade ago, who would have guessed that controversies about male circumcision would roil a number of European countries and achieve some resonance in the United States? But that is what has happened. These events have raised important questions about individual rights, parental authority, religious liberty, and the nature of morality.

The issue of male circumcision reached the front pages of newspapers around the world in June 2012 when a court in Cologne, Germany, ruled that circumcising young boys inflicted grievous bodily harm and that the child's "fundamental right to bodily integrity" trumped parental rights, despite the fact that the parents were acting in accordance with long-established and fundamental requirements of their religious faith. Although the case that reached the court concerned Muslim parents, its implications for Jews was obvious, and the president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany condemned the decision as "an unprecedented and dramatic intrusion on the self-determination of religious communities." Meeting a month later, Muslim and Jewish leaders issued a joint statement defending circumcision and calling on the German government to take action. Michael Bongardt, a professor of ethics at Berlin's Free University, contended that "the often very aggressive prejudice against religion as backward, irrational, and opposed to science is increasingly defining popular opinion." On the other side, a leading criminal-law expert called for a national discussion about "how much religiously motivated violence against children a society is ready to tolerate." With her country's troubled past weighing heavily on her, Chancellor Angela Merkel declared, "I do not want Germany to be the only country in the world in which Jews cannot practice their rites." By December 2012, the Bundestag passed legislation protecting parents' rights to have young boys circumcised.

The controversy was not confined to Germany. In 2011, doctors in the Netherlands organized against circumcision, denouncing the practice as a "painful and harmful ritual." Denmark became embroiled in a debate about whether to require medical supervision for all circumcisions or even to prohibit the practice outright. A socialist member of parliament declared that his Red-Green alliance advocated a ban on circumcision, and the Social Liberal Party—a member of Denmark's ruling coalition—followed suit. One of the country's most prestigious newspapers published an article describing circumcision as a ritual involving "black-clad men" who torture and mutilate babies. Meanwhile, Norway's Center Party announced that it opposed circumcision, as did Finland's third largest party, the populist True Finns. In a statement submitted to Sweden's National Board of Health and Welfare, the country's Pediatric Society called circumcision the "mutilation of a child unable to decide

CHESKEL DOVID

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To be human is to be shaped by the "cultural womb": by the decisions of myriad others long before we can participate in determining our own direction.

for himself" and advocated abolishing the procedure. In a meeting in Oslo on September 30, 2013, the five Nordic children's omsbudpersons released a joint resolution advocating a ban on nontherapeutic circumcision for underage boys.

These events are taking place against the backdrop of massive Muslim immigration to many European countries. In an analysis written for the Jewish People Policy Institute, Dov Maimon and Nadia Ellis comment that "as long as Jewish [animal] slaughter and Jewish circumcision were carried out on a very small scale, they were not regarded as a public-policy issue worthy of attention and were tolerated under special arrangements. The scaling-up of these practices as a result of the growing Muslim presence in several European countries now seems to require official regulation." A backlash against Muslims that affects core Jewish practices as well makes this perhaps the first time ever that the term "anti-Semitism" applies with tolerable accuracy.

No such demographic tidal wave has reached the United States, making it harder to explain why activists in San Francisco were able to collect the thousands of signatures needed to place a circumcision ban on the city's fall 2013 ballot. As in Germany, the state's legislature intervened, passing a bill prohibiting localities from banning the practice. Nonetheless, U.S. activists are working to place such measures on state and local ballots across the country, and one of the movement's leaders declared that "the end goal for us is making cutting boys' foreskin a federal crime."

This is hardly a trivial challenge to religious free exercise. Although the status and timing of male circumcision in Islam are debated among rival schools of jurisprudence, no such ambiguity exists among observant Jews. The Torah could not be clearer. In Genesis, God tells Abraham, "This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your seed after you: every male among you shall be circumcised.... And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every male throughout your generations.... And the uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant." As if to underscore its importance, this command is repeated in Leviticus. The covenant between God and the Jewish people is central to Judaism, and circumcision is at the heart of the covenant.

Calling into question this solemn obligation is a body of international laws and norms that has developed since World War II. Maimon and Ellis lay out the issues in their analysis. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes...freedom, either alone and in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance." On the other hand, Article 5 states that "no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment..." Many Europeans and not a few Americans regard circumcision as an instance of such "treatment." Before the Bundestag acted, 45 percent of Germans opposed circumcision; after legislation protecting the practice was enacted, anticircumcision sentiment shot up to 75 percent. In Britain, opposition to nonmedical circumcisions now approaches 40 percent of the population.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child declares that "freedom to manifest one's religion or belief may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others." But the convention leaves no doubt about the ultimate authority to make such determinations: while taking into account the rights and duties of parents, it is the role of each signatory government to define and protect the best interests of the child.

Although the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union guarantees the same rights of religious free exercise as the Universal Declaration, its Article 3 states that "everyone has the right to respect for his physical and mental integrity." Opponents of circumcision contend that it is a patent violation of the infant's physical integrity, carried out when the newborn is totally helpless and unable to understand what is happening, let alone consent to it.

This concern lies at the core of the resolution adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in October 2013. The Assembly, the resolution states, is "particularly worried about a category of violation of the physical integrity of children, which supporters of the procedures tend to present as beneficial to the children themselves despite clear evidence to the contrary. This includes... the circumcision of young boys for religious reasons." The author of the report justifying this resolution argues that "circumcision applied to young boys clearly is a human rights violation." Not only does it violate children's physical integrity; it is also undertaken without their consent. The

author is "convinced that children, if they were given a choice, would not decide to be harmed by a medical operation, which is not entirely beneficial to them." Parents' decisions should reflect what their children would want for their own development, and the state must step in when decisions diverge from that standard.

The circumcision controversy raises a number of densely overlapping issues. I begin with the most obvious—the limits governments may legitimately place on religious practices. That there are such limits is widely acknowledged. Few believe that the free exercise of religion includes the right to conduct noisy revival meetings at 2 a.m. in residential areas. A neo-Aztec sect might claim that its beliefs require virgin sacrifice; a neo-Canaanite sect might say the same about the firstborn. It seems safe to say that neither group would be permitted to act on its belief. Nor—to move a bit closer to our topic—would a religious group be allowed to amputate an infant's limb, whatever narrative might be invoked to justify the practice.

Moving from hypothetical to real cases, parents and guardians may not invoke their religious beliefs, however sincerely held, to withhold medical care from minors. When a child in a Jehovah's Witness family experiences internal bleeding, the parents are not allowed to block a potentially life-saving blood transfusion. When a child in a Christian Scientist family experiences a life-threatening infection, the state may intervene to administer antibiotics, regardless of the parents' beliefs.

All these cases involve clear-cut physical harm to minors, inflicted through acts of commission or omission. A fair reading of the evidence on circumcision yields no such conclusion. A number of studies find that the practice reduces the incidence of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, a conclusion endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics and the World Health Organization. To be sure, when the circumcision is botched, there are negative consequences. And there may be sound medical reasons for banning or regulating some risky methods of conducting circumcisions. For example, the New York City Board of Health voted to require parents to sign a consent form before allowing the person performing the circumcision to perform oral-genital suction, a practice (standard in some parts of the Orthodox Jewish community) to which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention traced eleven cases of infant herpes during the past decade, a few resulting in death.

But many opponents of circumcision regard these empirical considerations as irrelevant to their case. The point, they say, is the right to physical integrity, which prohibits inflicting any irreversible changes on children's bodies without their consent, which they cannot give prior to reaching the legal age of responsibility. Medical considerations limit the scope of this right: parents can authorize surgery to treat birth defects that impair normal functioning or threaten life. They may also repair congenital defects that might subject their children to ridicule or social exclusion. Infant circumcision meets none of these tests; the foreskin is not a birth defect.

Traditional Jews cannot accept this logic. They believe that failing to circumcise their male infants eight days after birth would subject both parents and children to grave spiritual harm—potential exclusion from the community. Invoking an allegedly inviolable right to physical integrity is hardly dispositive. What justifies such a broadly drawn right and gives it priority over the right to practice one's religion, which has long been regarded as a core human right? The exercise of religious beliefs should be enough to warrant the practice of circumcision unless opponents can demonstrate the likelihood of significant medical or physical harm, which in most cases they cannot.

Yeshiva University legal scholar Suzanne Last Stone argues that the language of human rights "has become the dominant mode of public moral discourse, replacing such discourses as distributive justice, the common good, and solidarity. Indeed, it has become something of a faith of its own." In this vein, traditional Jews would argue that the language of human rights hardly exhausts the realm of moral and spiritual goods. There are obligations as well as rights, and not all obligations rest on consent. No one consents to be born, but one enters the world with obligations—to

FUNERAL FOOD

all afternoon friends knocking softly
on the front door of our Ash Alley row home
saying to our mother how sorry
they were about her loss
patting her hand and delivering apple pies
plates of summer bologna and cheese
overflowing the kitchen table
and sheets on the cellar floor
that I'd have to walk around with two empty buckets
to the coal bin the bucket and shovel
rattling as I tended the furnace
to keep out the cold.

—Harry Humes

Harry Humes has published several collections of poetry, including Butterfly Effect *(Milkweed Editions), selected for the 1998 National Poetry Series.*

honor one's parents, for example—the significance of which emerges over time. From the traditional Jewish perspective, similarly, the children of Jewish parents do not choose Judaism; they are born into it, and they are subject thereby to a wide range of obligations they do not choose. Through education, they learn the meaning of those obligations and gain the capacity to choose how best to meet them. The element of choice is not entirely absent: some individuals born into Judaism may decide to repudiate membership in the community, while others born outside the community may decide to enter it and freely embrace its obligations.

Entering into unchosen relationships is hardly the exclusive province of traditional Judaism. In Catholic doctrine, baptism is the Christian equivalent of circumcision, the "circumcision of Christ." Like circumcision, baptism can be administered to children as well as adults, a proposition affirmed by Origen, Cyprian, John Chrysostom, and Augustine, among others. One is forced to wonder whether the human rights community's insistence on adult consent as a necessary source of authorization represents a secularized version of the Protestant rejection of infant baptism—and whether it is an accident that the epicenter of antipathy to infant circumcision is located in heavily Protestant northern Europe.

Of course, parents must act on behalf of their children until they reach adulthood. Legitimate civil concerns—the necessity of formal education, for example—limit parental discretion, as do the fundamental rights of children to life and the means to it, such as necessary medical care. The author of the Council of Europe report argues for a third category of limitation as well—namely, parents' good-faith effort to decide for their children as their children would decide for themselves. Parents, she insists, should become the "spokespersons of what their children would wish for their own development." In the case of circumcision, she has no doubt what this principle implies: "I am convinced that children, if they were given a choice, would not decide to be harmed by a medical operation which is not entirely beneficial to them."

It is hard to discern the basis of her confidence, because the concepts of "development" and "benefit" are incompletely specified. Some parents subject their children to religious education that the children resent and reject as soon as they are able. Other parents do the opposite on the grounds that their children should make religious decisions for themselves as adults—only to be reproached by their grown children for having deprived them of a serious religious education when they were best able to absorb it. The maxim of deciding for children as they would decide for themselves offers little guidance in practice. Some children who are forced early on to learn a musical instrument end up grateful to the parents who insisted they should. Children's desires and preferences evolve unpredictably in response to experience, much of which is unchosen and some of which is unpleasant.

Still, the critics insist, there is a distinction between education and a surgical procedure. Adults may reject the education they received when young, but they cannot reject their circumcision. It is the "irreversibility" of the procedure that clinches the case for not imposing it on infants.

As a technical matter, circumcision is not irreversible. (I will spare readers the details.) The broader point is this: for better or worse, much of what parents do is irreversible. Where they choose to live will determine their children's native language and culture, and the decisions they make about their children's secular and religious education will be indelible. My friends who were raised as traditional Catholics tell me that their adult practices and beliefs—however far removed from those of their parents—do not efface the effects of childhood experiences. To be human—creatures of plasticity as well as instinct—is to be shaped by the "cultural womb": by the decisions of myriad others long before we can participate in determining our own direction. Parents have no choice but to do the best they can, relying on their own understanding of what is right and good, in full knowledge that they will make mistakes, some of which will have lasting impact.

For traditional Jews, circumcision is a God-given obligation, the key to and symbol of membership in an ancient and worthy community. Rearing their children in that community, they believe, is the greatest gift they can give them. If excising a male infant's foreskin were the moral equivalent of amputating his hand, the state would have no choice but to intervene. Only the commitment to an abstract and dubious right of physical integrity could blind observers to the obvious distinction between these two things. There is no reason for the law of the state to follow suit. ■

Hunger Games

Who Gets to Eat & Who Decides

Peter Quinn

Along with air and water, food is the common denominator of human survival. Throughout history, the quest for daily sustenance has often been precarious. Food shortages caused by crop failures or extreme weather were (and are) common enough. But beginning with the Industrial Revolution in the mid-seventeenth century, as millions left the land for the cities and populations exploded, thinkers disagreed about how best to feed people in an economy based on manufacturing rather than agriculture. Should it be left to the free market? Or should governments take control? What criteria should be used to decide who gets fed—and in what amount—and who doesn't? Are some more deserving of being fed than others?

Weighing in on these questions, Adam Smith was sanguine. In 1776 he published *The Wealth of Nations*, in which he lauded the free market and the profit motive as drivers of economic progress. "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner," he wrote, "but from their regard to their own interest." The "invisible hand" of competition would harness private ambition to the public good. Smith's near-contemporary Thomas Malthus was far more pessimistic. Malthus's influential tract *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, first published in 1798 and revised several times afterward, turned the invisible hand into an iron fist: Unless kept in check, he maintained, human reproduction would outrun the best efforts to increase the food supply and would lead inevitably to famine and mass death.

Charles Darwin and Karl Marx sided more with Smith than with Malthus. Although Malthus's assertion of the indifference and profligacy with which nature spawned and destroyed life helped Darwin formulate his theory of "natural selection," in which only the fittest survived, Darwin believed that famines no longer played a critical part in human evolution. In his seminal book *On the Origin of Species* (1859), he described "famines and other such accidents" as occurrences "to which savages are so liable." In *The Descent of Man* (1871), he expanded on that liability:

> With savages the difficulty of obtaining subsistence occasionally limits their number in a much more direct manner than with civilized people, for all tribes periodically suffer from severe famines. At such times savages are forced to devour much bad food, and their health can hardly fail to be injured.

Darwin's comment offers no hint that even as he worked in his home in Cornwall writing *On the Origin of Species*, the greatest civilian catastrophe in nineteenth-century Europe was unfolding just a day's journey away, in Ireland—the Irish famine, which triggered waves of mass death and emigration. The failure on Darwin's part to mention the Irish famine might have reflected his belief that it was a historical aberration, or perhaps he wished to steer clear of the political and nationalistic passions it stirred.

Karl Marx, on the other hand, was too busy hailing the coming triumph of the urban proletariat to pay attention to the collapse of the antiquated and doomed social structure of rural Ireland. Marx didn't touch on events in Ireland in *The Communist Manifesto*, published in 1848 at the height of the famine. Instead he celebrated the bourgeoisie as the gravedigger of the old order: "It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life." In his masterwork, *Das Kapital* (1867)—he sent an inscribed copy to Darwin—he wrote dismissively that "the Irish famine of 1846 killed more than 1,000,000 people, but it killed poor devils only."

In *Famine: A Short History* (2009), Irish economist Cormac Ó Gráda questions whether famines ever served as a Malthusian check on population. "In the past," Ó Gráda contends, "the demographic impact of famines tended to be relatively short-lived." Disease provided the Grim Reaper a more reliable scythe, especially among infants and the aged. It's undeniable, however, that famines played a critical role in the struggle for global supremacy that unfolded from the middle of the nineteenth century into the second part of the twentieth. Along with John Kelly's eminently readable history of the Irish famine, *The Graves Are Walking: The Great Famine and the Saga of the Irish People*,

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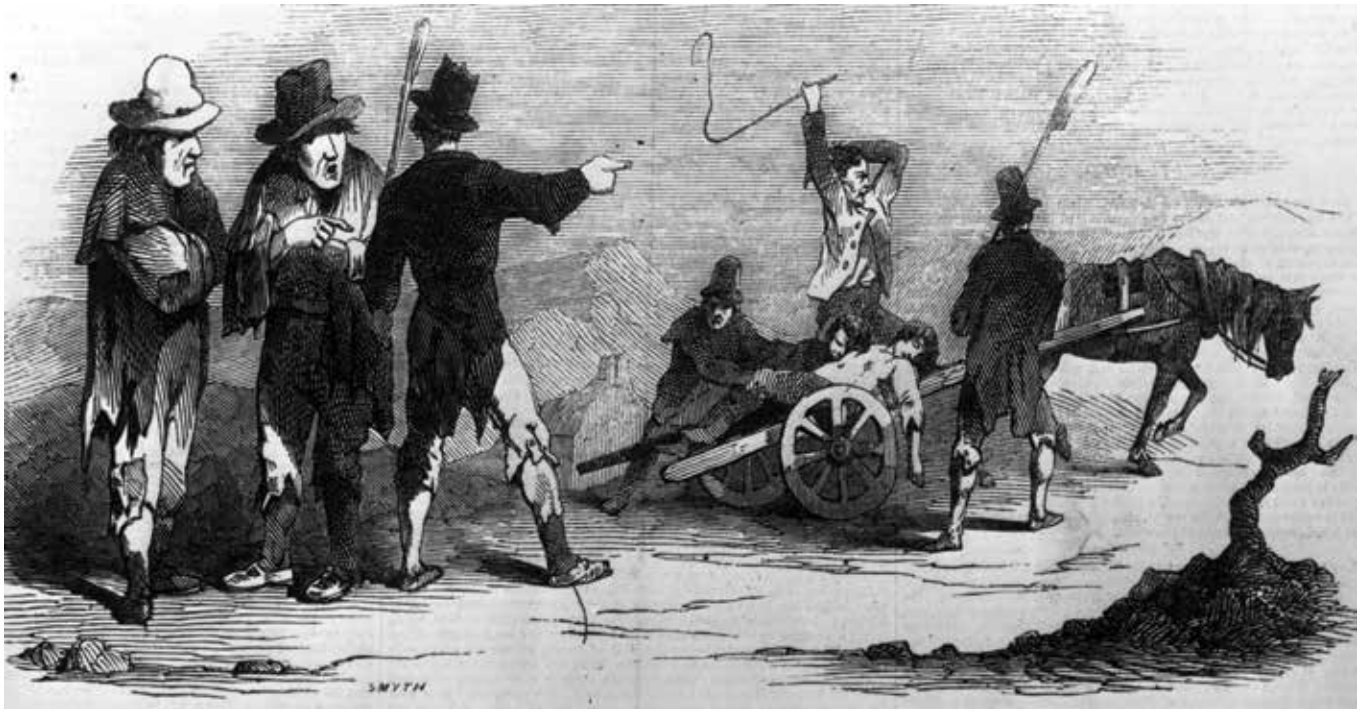

"The Great Famine," illustration by Smyth in the Illustrated London News*, 1847*

three recent books—Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, Lizzie Collingham's *The Taste of War: World War II and the Battle for Food*, and *Tombstone: The Great Chinese Famine 1958–1962* by Yang Jisheng—provide instructive reminders of the degree to which food supply has been used as a tool of social engineering and a weapon of war.

As these books make clear, between 1845 and 1961—a span of little more than a century—the number of deaths from hunger and its effects exceeded the total in all of preceding human history. The ratio of deaths to population in the Irish famine (1845–51) and the Chinese famine (1958–61) represent record rates of mortality. The central problem in most modern famines was never an absolute lack of food. At issue was distribution. Contra Malthus, the volume of mortality wasn't simply a case of too many mouths to feed; rather, to one degree or another, economic theories and government bureaucracies were the culprits. This was no mere innocent bureaucratic bungling, as John Kelly's book makes clear. On the contrary, these catastrophes were either used or conceived to bring about the modernization of underlying socioeconomic structures.

How did this happen? The short answer is that hunger shook hands with administrative bureaucracy, economic theory, and political ideology. As Cormac Ó Gráda reminds us, the United Kingdom of the 1840s possessed "the wealthiest economy in the world." Its navy and merchant marine ruled and regulated world trade. It dominated markets across the globe, sometimes—as with the Opium Wars with China—prying them open at gunpoint. Its manufacturing prowess was unchallenged. For all these reasons, Britain in the mid-nineteenth century could accurately be described as the first nation to make the full transition into modernity. The Irish famine was part of this transition. With the arrival of a devastating potato blight in the autumn of 1845, Sir Robert Peel, the Tory prime minister, took steps to prevent a catastrophic increase in mortality. But Peel also intended to use the crisis to break the tenacious grip of Ireland's small farmers and laborers on their paltry holdings and turn them into wage earners employed on large, efficient farms—or factory workers in the industrial centers of the British Isles.

Peel may have hoped this could be done with a minimum of distress to the several million people at the bottom of the Irish economic pyramid, but by the summer of 1846 he was out of office—and Sir John Russell, his Liberal Party successor, was a disciple of the Manchester School, which held that government should abstain from interference with the laws of supply and demand. This faith was reinforced by the reigning orthodoxies of Protestant Evangelicalism and Providentialism, which rested on the confidence that God sent disasters like the potato blight as punishment for human transgressions and as an opportunity for imposing the kind of moral reform that would bring Ireland into conformity with the superior values of Anglo-Saxon society. As the *London Times* editorialized in the autumn of 1846, "An island, a social state, a race is to be changed. The surface of the land, its divisions, its culture...its law, its language, and the heart of a people who for two thousand years have remained unalterable within the compass of those mighty changes which have given us European civilization, are all to be created anew."

Before the work of re-creation came the job of razing what was in place. Sir Charles Trevelyan, an eminent Victorian who served as assistant secretary of the Treasury, welcomed the blight as a heaven-sent chance to "cure" the Irish of

SAMUEL AUSTIN

chronic dependency. In 1847, the Parliament abandoned any pretense of assisting the Irish—shutting down soup kitchens and other relief efforts—and acted to facilitate clearing the land of as many tenants as possible. For anyone remotely acquainted with the situation in Ireland, the consequences were obvious. "But unlike the morally blinkered, who saw only hunger, misery, and death in the ruined potato fields," writes John Kelly sardonically," Mr. Trevelyan saw the restless hand of God at work."

In his 1860 jeremiad *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*, Irish nationalist John Mitchel charged that "the Almighty, indeed, sent the potato blight, but the English created the Famine." In indicting the British government for "deliberate murder" —the word "genocide" wouldn't be coined for another eight decades—he articulated a sentiment shared by many Irish and Irish-Americans, both then and today. Kelly's judgment on this question—that while "the intent" of British relief policy "may not have been genocidal…the effects were"—is equivocal. But perhaps it's as close to the truth as we can get. Though contempt for the Irish colored everything they did, Trevelyan and company neither caused the blight nor set out to send a million people to their deaths. Yet they concocted a policy of malign neglect and active interference designed to use a food shortage to reshape Irish society. Whether the Irish wasted away from hunger and disease or fled abroad—in excess of 2 million emigrated in a single decade—didn't matter. The ideological end of modernizing "an island, a social state, a race" justified the means.

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More than half a century later, in the wake of World War I, hunger once again became a tool of peacetime social engineering on a massive scale. In sync with the "scientific certainties" of Marxism, the Bolshevik faction under Lenin that took control of Russia in 1917 believed in iron laws of economics as devoutly as did the acolytes of the Manchester School. Yet the fruit that had fallen into their lap wasn't, as Marx had predicted, an industrialized society planted and ripened by the bourgeoisie, but rather the ramshackle, backward, heavily agricultural Czarist Empire, where socialism would have to be sown and grown, not reaped through revolution.

Timothy Snyder portrays Lenin as shrewdly tempering ruthlessness with realism, conducting a "political holding action" that gave a degree of autonomy to the various republics and allowed private ownership. But after Lenin's death in 1924, his choice as general secretary of the Communist Party, the crafty and conscienceless Joseph Stalin, put aside his predecessor's caution and pursued an overnight transformation of the new Soviet state. Begun in 1928, Stalin's first Five Year Plan was a breakneck push into urban-industrial modernity premised on returning peasants to serfdom. Their crops would feed the cities and provide exports to generate the hard currency to buy foreign machinery. The wealthier peasants were tagged *kulaks* ("tight-fisted"), an elastic label stretched to include anyone who resisted surrendering his holdings, however meager, to the state. Tens of thousands were shot; 1.7 million were deported to the Gulag.

The epicenter of this action was Ukraine, which, in Snyder's description, became "a giant starvation camp, with watchtowers, sealed borders, pointless and painful labor, and endless and predictable death" (see "Europe's Darkest Hour," *Commonweal*, February 22, 2011). The result was the famine of 1930–33—"the greatest artificial famine in the history of the world": more than 5 million died in what Snyder deems an act of deliberate genocide directed against the Ukrainian people. Writing in the *London Review of Books* (November 4, 2010), historian Richard J. Evans argued that Stalin's starvation policy didn't actually single out Ukrainians but was directed against kulaks—many of them Russian. Yet Snyder is indisputably correct when he emphasizes the non-Malthusian essence of Stalin's famine, which "took place in times of peace, and was related more or less distantly to an ideologically informed vision of modernization."

During World War II, Adolf Hitler pursued a policy—justified as a requirement of German national survival and as a right conferred by racial superiority—of making war in order to seize new national living space (*lebensraum*). The key lay in the East, from which, as Lizzie Collingham puts it, Hitler imagined Germany could carve out "its own version of the American west." Collingham's enlightening book reveals the extent to which food production, distribution, and consumption were critical to the conduct and outcome of the war. Often ignored or relegated to the war's backstory, food, as Collingham tells it, was a prime motive in the ambitions of the aggressors and a strategic priority among the major combatants.

In 1941, a critical year in the war, Hitler launched Opera-

tion Barbarossa, in the hope of scoring a lightning victory over the U.S.S.R. Like Stalin, Hitler focused on a swift and radical transformation of the Soviet countryside, particularly Ukraine. Herbert Backe, head of the innocuous-sounding Reich Ministry for Food and Agriculture, drafted the Nazi blueprint. A classic "desk criminal" (*Schreibtischtater*) who never served on the front or set foot in a death camp, Backe laid out a grand scheme for a postwar resettlement—"The Hunger Plan"—that envisioned "a European California," its "idyllic new towns and ideal agricultural communities" built on the graves of 30 million Slavs methodically starved to death, with another 70 million shipped off to the Soviet Arctic zone to labor and die in a gulag now under German management.

In the event—and at the price of horrendous losses—the Red Army stopped the Nazi onslaught, and the Hunger Plan was never put into full operation. Nevertheless, Hitler used hunger against his opponents wherever he could. Patients in the Reich's mental hospitals were put on a diet designed to kill in three months. Of the 3 million Soviet POWs who died in captivity, Timothy Snyder estimates that 2.6 million perished from hunger. Several million Soviet civilians starved, 1 million in the siege of Leningrad alone. And many of the 6 million Jews who perished, both in and out of the death camps, died from hunger.

On the Western front of the war, Hitler had hoped that a relentless campaign of U-Boat attacks could damage Britain's supply lines so badly it would be forced to make peace. And indeed, at their peak, U-Boats sank about 10 percent of food shipments to Britain. Thanks to the astounding prodigality of U.S. supplies and shipping, however, the U-Boat attacks never came close to sinking Britain itself. "Throughout the worst months of the Battle of the Atlantic," Collingham concludes, "British civilians were never confronted with the problem of hunger, let alone the specter of starvation."

For its part, Britain ran its wartime food policies according to what Collingham describes as "an unspoken food hierarchy" that relegated the needs of its colonial subjects to the bottom. As she reports, Prime Minister Winston Churchill and his War Cabinet decided "that India would be the part of the empire where the greatest civilian sacrifices would have to be made." When told that the food situation in India had become critical, the War Cabinet's reaction, in Collingham's judgment, was "irresponsible and brutal." Echoing Trevelyan's verdict on the Irish a century before, Churchill "claimed that Indians had brought these problems on themselves by breeding like rabbits and must pay the price of their own improvidence." The Bengal famine that raged between 1943 and '44 killed approximately 3 million people. Confronted with the facts of what was happening, Churchill asked "if food was so scarce in India, why had Gandhi not yet died?" That famine, ironically, was carved forever into the childhood consciousness of Amartya Sen, then a nine-year-old boy in West Bengal. Sen grew up to become a Nobel Prize–winning economist whose seminal work on famine has revealed how far the phenomenon rests not on actual shortages of food, but on social inequalities and on politicizations of the food-provision mechanisms that invariably work against the poor.

As for the other major combatant nations in World War II, imperial Japan didn't plan for systematically starving those under its sway. In Collingham's view, however, the so-called Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and the planned settlement of a million Japanese farmers in Manchuria shared the same rationale as the German drive for *lebensraum*; expansionism and the exploitation of conquered peoples and territories were seen as the sine qua non of being a player on the world stage. Collingham estimates the toll inflicted by the Japanese invasion of China to be "at least 15 million civilians, 85 percent of them peasants, and virtually all them the victims of deprivation and starvation." The suffering in China was paralleled by that in Indo-China, where Japan's "ruthless requisitioning of rice" led to the Tonkin famine, in which 1 to 2 million Vietnamese died of hunger, with new research suggesting "that the scale of the horror was far greater."

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Despite early success at plundering the empire they'd conquered, the Japanese themselves soon felt the effects of the counterattack mounted by the far more powerful United States. Where German U-Boats failed to sever Britain's supply lines, the U.S. submarine campaign shredded Japan's maritime supply lanes. By 1944, Japan's shipping capacity had been reduced by 60 percent, and the situation quickly worsened, threatening ultimately to become militarily decisive. As Collingham makes clear, citing Napoleon's famous adage that "an army travels on its stomach," Japan's military crawled to defeat on a nearly empty belly, with "60 percent, or more than 1 million, of the total 1.74 million Japanese military deaths between 1941 and 1945…caused by starvation and diseases associated with malnutrition."

These food-related deaths were the result of dedicated

American military policies. Beginning in March 1945, the United States undertook Operation Starvation, dedicating a special force of B-29s under General Curtis Lemay to seed the waters around the home islands with mines. Japanese shipping was paralyzed. Hunger was rampant, famine inevitable. Only the dropping of the atom bombs spared the Japanese from having to choose, in the end, between starvation and submission.

Two great powers emerged out of World War II: the Soviet Union and the United States. Historians continue to debate the origins of the Cold War that followed. How much was due to Stalin's intransigence and belligerency? How much to blind anti-Communism on the part of American leaders? What's clear is that among a significant portion of the anticolonial leadership in the less-developed world, choosing the Marxist-Leninist model of imposing industrialization and modernization through central planning and one-party control seemed more viable than following the capitalist road. The victory of the Chinese Communists in 1949 put the world's most populous nation under the rule of Mao Zedong, a doctrinaire Marxist-Leninist who set out in as short a time as possible to make the People's Republic the equal of the two superpowers—an ambition embodied in the cruelly named "Great Leap Forward."

As chronicled by Yang Jisheng, a long-time reporter for China's official news agency, the Great Leap Forward pulled the country into an abyss of mass starvation and death. Jisheng recognizes his own complicity in the cover-up that followed. He didn't question the Communist Party's version of events—in which his own father perished—until, disillusioned by the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, he set out to unearth the truth behind the famine of 1958–61. The resulting book, *Tombstone*, is a highly detailed, two-volume account (the English version has been edited into a single volume) intended by Jisheng as a memorial to his father—a "tombstone in my heart," he writes—and to the millions of other victims.

Jisheng demolishes the notion that bad weather, tight global grain markets, or the withdrawal of Soviet advisers contributed to the deaths of 30 million people, and lays the blame squarely on Mao. A megalomaniacal tyrant who envisioned his rule as a marriage, in his own words, of "Marx with [the ancient emperor] Qin Shi-huang," Mao used the Great Leap Forward to gather the peasantry into military-style communes, turning the Chinese countryside into a gigantic barracks. Civil society was abolished. The family was done away with. Every aspect of life and work was regimented by the state. The people were to be created anew.

Ideological rigidity and economic fantasy produced collective insanity. When Beijing issued quotas, which local officials met and exceeded by requisitioning every ounce of grain, officials then set new and higher quotas. Communal kitchens, inefficient to begin with, became hopelessly undersupplied. An utterly unrealistic plan for spurring local steel production led to communes melting down whatever was at hand—cooking implements, ploughs, temple bells, etc. When the true effects of the catastrophe grew evident, Mao denounced "right-deviationist thinking" among naysayers and subversives, and unleashed a wave of violent repression.

Jisheng's chronicle of the suffering that flowed from Mao's orders insistently recounts the mind-numbing particulars of how many died, where, and how. "The labor reform team of the Zhongba administrative district," *Tombstone* tells us, "included an eleven-year-old girl named Chen Yuxiu, who was forced to work for five straight days and nights. She collapsed, bleeding from the nose and mouth, and ultimately died." In the details of suffering, all famines are, finally, alike. Mao's Chinese victims underwent the same gruesome physical ravages John Kelly describes among the Irish: "the eyelids inflame; the angular lines around the mouth deepen into cavities; the swollen thyroid gland becomes tumor-sized; fields of white fungus cover the tongue, blistering mouth sores develop, the skin acquires the texture of parchment; teeth decay and fall out, gums ooze pus, and a long silky growth of hair covers the face." The suffering continues among the survivors in weakened bones, damaged hearts, haunted memories, and multi-generational psychological effects. Studies done after the Second World War indicate that, when subject to malnutrition and starvation in the womb, children were born with a predisposition to schizophrenia and psychotic depression. The repercussions, reports Lizzie Collingham, "are still echoing down through the generations, into the present day."

Whether adherents of Marxism, the Manchester School, or National Socialism, in both war and peace those in charge of modern famines agreed that it was the victims who were at fault. Irish peasants were lazy and superstitious; Ukrainian kulaks, greedy and reactionary; Slavs and Jews, filthy *untermenschen*; Bengalese, chronic overbreeders. In the eyes of the Japanese, Chinese peasants were incorrigible and primitive; in Mao's view, they were "regressionists" who lacked "adequate psychological preparation for socialist revolution." Progress, however defined, depended on removing the human impediments that stood in its way.

Except in rogue states like North Korea, the era of employing hunger as an instrument of social engineering seems to have run its course. Yet hunger and malnutrition continue to be matters of worldwide concern; indeed, millions of people still exist on the cusp of starvation. Global warming and climate change seem certain to exacerbate this situation and lead to upheavals in the supply and distribution of the world's food resources. What remains to be seen is whether, as a global community of 9 billion people and counting, we will cope with those changes in a way that enables us to prevent mass hunger—or, instead, continue to put ideology ahead of individuals and play new and ghastly versions of the same old games. ■

Richard Alleva

Wes Goes East

'THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL'

Since most of Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is set in Eastern Europe between the two world wars, with that era's turbulence represented by fascist troops closing and patrolling borders, one might conclude that the new movie is an atypical work for this filmmaker—a far cry from his usual apolitical stories about the whimsical friendships and neurotic families of upper-middle-class Amercians. But actually it's just a case of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. The pernicious politics of the era is kept well in the background and doesn't affect the main action until the very end of the movie. For the most part, Anderson has simply advanced further into Andersonland, a quaint but somewhat treacherous country where adults comport themselves like bright, cosseted children playing games according to their own secret rules and suffering poignant, often painful consequences.

Monsieur Gustave (Ralph Fiennes), the concierge of the eponymous hotel in the mythical country of Zubrowka, is bequeathed an invaluable painting by an elderly aristocrat, Madame D. (Tilda Swinton), whom he's been sexually gratifying for years—as he has many other rich elderly women. After she dies under mysterious circumstances, Gustave and his adolescent protégé, a "lobby boy" named Moustafa whose nickname is Zero, impulsively snatch the painting to save it from the clutches of Madame D.'s murderous relatives. An adventure story ensues, one that includes murders, false arrest, the most fanciful prison break ever filmed, a youthful romance between Zero and a plucky confectioner, a death-defying sled chase near an Alpine Capuchin monastery, a three-way shootout in the hotel, and several other scenes that wouldn't be out of place in a James Bond thriller. But Anderson remains Anderson throughout, and the exotic settings and genre set pieces are stylized to fit his peculiar fairyland. Imagine a Graham Greene or Eric Ambler thriller rewritten by Lewis Carroll. Imagine a melodrama enacted within a giant Fabergé egg.

Anderson's style—enabled, as usual, by the cinematography of Robert Yeoman—is evident everywhere, even in the shifting dimensions of the film's frame. The main story, which takes place in the early 1930s, is narrated in the 1960s by a now-aged Zero (F. Murray Abraham) to a writer (Jude Law). Anderson frames the encounter between Abraham and Law within the horizontally long "letterbox" aspect ratio familiar to moviegoers since the invention of CinemaScope. But the scenes from the 1930s are all in the format of the pre-CinemaScope era, with more height than width. Thus we watch this tale of

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Framed

long-gone Austro-Hungarian elegance on a cinematic canvas that is itself an artifact of nostalgia.

Aside from this clever (and appropriate) technical innovation, Anderson's familiar visual and dramatic tics are here in abundance: the dead-on close-ups reminiscent of Diane Arbus but without her mordancy; the mock solemnity of the acting italicizing the mock naïveté of the dialogue; the rapid-fire speeches delivered by characters dashing down hallways or through lobbies; bit-part actors placed far in the distance or at the periphery of a shot to perform cute comic business while the lead characters speak in center-screen close-up. But these coy mannerisms, often hard to digest in contemporary American settings, are very much in keeping with the period this film is set in and the extravagance of its characters—especially the dandified, preening, supersensitive Gustave. Likewise, this film's dialogue, just as arch as that of earlier Anderson films, seems right when we hear it from a man like Gustave, who is accustomed to using flowery language to stroke the sensibilities of his customers and aristocratic bedmates.

This role is superbly written and even more superbly acted by Ralph Fiennes, who brings to it a zest and precision that surpasses everything else I've seen him do. Gustave is one of the most original movie characters of all time: effeminate (by American macho standards) yet brave even in moments of physical danger; an aesthete capable of the most ruthless practicality (he gushes on receipt of Madame D's gift, then immediately resolves to sell it rather than have the villains get it back); an occasional hysteric who also has the toughness to traverse Eastern Europe in pursuit of justice. Fiennes's needle-sharp voice and lightning-fast ability to shift from superciliousness to steely resolve help make Gustave an oddly agreeable hero for our time—the metrosexual as Noble Knight. He is always believable even when the story isn't.

Of course, we can forgive outrageous plot twists in a melodrama or farce (and *Grand Budapest* is both) but not when they violate consistency of characterization or just plain common sense. This movie goes over the line now and then. When a lawyer (played by Jeff Goldblum) realizes he's being trailed by a hired thug (played by a quietly fearsome Willem Dafoe), why does he get off a tram only to enter a dark museum at closing time, where he's bound to be more vulnerable? Answer: The director wants to film the pursuit down shadowy hallways amid suits of armor and sarcophagi. His visual cleverness has betrayed his sense of narrative. And why does he weaken his story with two unnecessary framing devices? First, we witness a tribute at the grave of a renowned writer in 2014. Then, in 1985, we meet that same writer (played by Tom Wilkinson), who gives us a lecture on the sources of fiction, and this takes us to the one really effective framing story: the meeting in 1968 of the writer in his youth (Law) and the elderly Zero (Abraham) in the Budapest Hotel. There, at last, we hear Zero tell the film's main story. Why all the preliminary fussing? Anderson seems to be indulging a fondness for the Russian-doll approach to storytelling, but this gives unnecessary emphasis to the writer who, properly, should only exist as a proxy for the audience—someone to hear Zero's story. And when Abraham, a very expressive actor, is replaced by Tony Revolori as the younger Zero, there is a sense of letdown, as Revolori was evidently directed to keep his face blank and to speak in a near-monotone. This is meant to produce the kind of deadpan comedy Anderson favors, but, because Revolori is onscreen for most of the film, the result is wearisome.

But then, that's Wes Anderson for you—always true to his whims, whether they help his movies or not. I consider him one of the bright lights of American filmmaking, and, overall, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* reinforces my admiration for him. But there are moments when I wish he'd grow up. ■

Gary Gutting

Doubting Thomas

Thomas Aquinas
A Portrait
Denys Turner
Yale University Press, $28, 312 pp.

Not being a historian of medieval philosophy, I can't vouch for the historical accuracy of Denys Turner's account of Thomas Aquinas's thought. But as a philosopher appreciating careful and creative thinking about Christian teachings, I can and do recommend Turner's book as an impressive achievement. His Aquinas is a lucid and rigorous philosopher, following every argument wherever it leads, showing enormous ingenuity and unflinching integrity. Unfortunately, Turner's discussion also shows—though he wouldn't agree—that in most cases the final result is not deeper understanding but unintelligibility.

Given the space available, I'll focus on just three key Christian doctrines where Aquinas's arguments lead to perplexing conclusions: immortality, creation, and the nature of God as both one and triune. Turner covers much else, including stimulating discussions of Aquinas on grace, divine love, the Incarnation, and transubstantiation, as well as an ingenious view of how Aquinas the philosopher and theologian relates to Aquinas the saint. But, throughout, the specter of unintelligibility—or, if you like, "mystery"—looms large.

Turner emphasizes that there is an important sense in which Aquinas's view of human beings is materialist. It is not a reductive materialism: Aquinas doesn't claim, for example, that consciousness itself is nothing but a flux of neurons. Aquinas insists that there are irreducibly nonmaterial aspects of our existence. But he rejects the idea that a human being is a soul, only contingently connected to a body; rather, our identity as persons requires embodiment. The "soul" is an Aristotelian form, animating the body, not a Platonic substance temporarily "inhabiting" the body. The person I am *is* an animal and *must* have a body.

Aquinas does have an argument that he thinks shows that the soul is immortal and so will exist forever after death. But, as Turner points out, "Thomas says that even though human souls survive death, souls thus separated from their bodies are not persons." How could they be, since a person must be embodied? Therefore, according to Aquinas, since I am a person, I do not survive my death. When my body dies, I cease to exist.

How can this be consistent with the Christian promise of eternal life? Aquinas's answer is that eternal life is achieved through the body's resurrection and reunion with the soul, which has survived continuously, but not as me—or any other person. Showing that this answer is even possible requires some difficult threading of philosophical needles. First, of course, Aquinas must develop a cogent argument that the soul is immortal, a particularly difficult matter, since he has defined it as not a substance in its own right but the life-principle of an animal body.

Aquinas, however, maintains that, despite its intimate connection to a material body, the human soul is immaterial by virtue of its capacity for knowing material things. The nub of his argument is that an act of knowing must itself be "neutral" regarding the object known. For example, an act of hearing a sound must itself be soundless (otherwise, its own sound would interfere with the sound it is hearing). Similarly, an act of seeing a color must itself be colorless. Accordingly, an act of knowing a material thing must itself be immaterial.

The argument is not compelling, not least because of its questionable analogy of intellectual knowing with sense perception. But even if we grant the soul's immateriality, its strong dependence on the body still suggests that it will not be able to exist without a body. Immateriality does not imply immortality. Further, even if the soul is immortal, does it make any sense to say that the person resulting from the strange process of resurrection could actually be me? If we ask why I'm the same person as the infant born years ago, there are two sorts of answers. One refers to the body: my present body results from a continuous series of changes beginning with the infant's body. Another answer refers to psychological states: my current psychological state (memories, feelings, etc.) can be traced back through a continuous series of psychological states to those of the infant.

There's room for considerable philosophical disagreement about which of these conditions—or which combination of them—makes for personal identity. But Aquinas's account of resurrection violates both of them. There is neither bodily continuity nor psychological continuity between me and the resurrected person. Aquinas is right that a Platonic identification of the human person with an immaterial soul does not fit well with what we know, philosophically and scientifically, about human beings. But the Platonic view makes the doctrine of immortality relatively easy to understand, whereas, at best, Aquinas's more materialist Aristotelian view makes it extremely difficult to understand.

The problem of understanding is even more difficult when we turn to

the claim that God is creator of all things, a claim Aquinas thinks he has established by natural reason. The basis of the claim, especially as developed by his Third Way in the *Summa*, is that every contingent thing (any thing that might not exist) comes into or remains in existence only through God's creative power. A first problem is that, as Turner deftly shows, this view of creation conflicts with one common response to the argument from evil against the existence of God. That argument claims that an all-good, all-powerful God would have been both able and willing to eliminate evil from the created world. The free-will defense responds that this need not be so, since creatures (like ourselves) capable of free choices are a great good, but one that may lead to freely chosen evil actions. God could, of course, cause all of our actions to be good ones, but then these actions wouldn't be free. It may, therefore, be that the value of free choice offsets the bad results of evil actions, so that God could not have this good in his creation without allowing the creatures to make evil choices. This shows the consistency of a divine creator with the reality of evil.

St. Thomas Aquinas, *Joos van Wassenhove, ca. 1476*

But, according to Turner, for Aquinas the free-will defense is a nonstarter. Everything, including our free choices, must be caused by God's creative power, whereas the free-will defense assumes that if an action is caused by God it isn't free. As Turner puts it: "It is too easily taken for granted that to speak of God causing my free actions is necessarily a contradiction. For Thomas far from it: worse, to say my actions are free only insofar as God does not cause them presupposes a plainly idolatrous conception of the divine causality." Rather, for Aquinas, "our free actions are the direct creation of the divine will."

It's not just that we lose one of the main responses to the problem of evil. More important, on Aquinas's view, our concept of causality collapses when it is applied to divine creation. An action directly and entirely caused by another agent is by definition not my action. You can say the words "God is the total and direct cause of my free action," but in this claim both "free" and "cause" lose contact with what those terms mean. If the words are not contradictory, they are meaningless.

Finally, there is Aquinas's account of the nature of God. Here the discussion takes two directions: an analysis of the truth, knowable by natural reason, that God is one; and an analysis of the truth, knowable only by revelation, that God is triune.

The oneness of God would pose no special problem if it meant that God is the only one of his kind. But Aquinas denies this formulation on the grounds that God does not belong to any kind—as, for example, an eagle is a kind of bird. According to Aquinas, this is because if God did belong to, say, the kind *divine being*, then there could be other instances of this kind—since, as a matter of logic, it's always possible that there could be many instances of a kind. But there doesn't just happen to be one God; there *cannot* be more than one. (One way to show this might be to note that God is nothing but total perfection, so that for a being to differ from the one God would mean that it was imperfect and so not a divine being.) It follows that God does not belong to any kind.

This result alone is a major obstacle to any real understanding of God. For it means that when we say God is "wise," is "good," or "loves" us, this cannot mean that he is wise, good, or loving in the same sense that, for example, we are. It is not a matter of his having, even to a maximal degree, the *kind* of feature a human being who is wise, etc., has. The terms we use to describe God cannot mean what we mean by them.

Aquinas's response is to say that in speaking of God we use these terms "analogously." But analogies are useful only because we can say in what respects they hold and in what respects they don't. If I say, "my love is like a rose," I don't mean that she has thorns and grows in the ground, but that, for example, she has a certain sort of delicate beauty. This, however, implies that she is an instance of the kind *beauty*. This can't be what we mean when we say God is good or beautiful, since God belongs to no kind. So it remains fundamentally unclear what our talk about God means. (Turner's failure to discuss Aquinas on analogy is one point on which I would fault his excellent book.)

But Turner does discuss in detail another problem that arises from Aquinas's understanding of God's oneness: showing that there is no contradiction in the central Christian doctrine of the Trinity. According to the doctrine, there are three divine persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but there is only one God. In other words, each person fully possesses all the attributes of God, but still there is only one God. How can this be? If there are three persons and each of them is fully God, how can there not be three Gods?

The standard formula to avoid contra-

diction is that the three divine persons "share" the same divine nature. But this won't work because it amounts to saying that the divine nature corresponds to a *kind* of being in which Father, Son, and Spirit share. Thus, the kind *divine being* would have these three instances. This can't be true, for two reasons: God, as we have seen, cannot belong to a kind; and, if there were three beings that were instances of the kind *divine being*, then there would be three Gods, not one.

According to Turner, Aquinas (like Augustine) "saw that what gets in the way of Trinitarian orthodoxy is the troublesome word 'person.'" As long as we take "person" to have the standard meaning of "an individual substance of a rational nature" (to use Boethius's classic formulation), the claim that three persons are God must imply that there are three Gods. To avoid contradiction, says Aquinas, we must change the meaning of "person" when we apply the term to God.

In particular, we need to make the astonishing assertion that a divine person is not a substance (an independently existing individual) but a *relation*. Instead of saying, as the traditional theology does, that the Father generates the Son, we must say that the Father is *the relation of generating*. And rather than saying that the Son is generated by the Father, we must say that the Son is *the relation of being generated*. We might be able to entertain the idea that a person could be a relation. We might, for example, coherently think that the person I am is the complex relation composed of all the relations among the different temporal stages of my existence. But here we still have my various temporal stages as the things that are related to one another (the *relata*). In the case of God, what are the *relata*?

The only possibility is that the persons of the Trinity themselves are the *relata* (introducing anything else as *relata* will make the divine persons derivative from—and dependent on—something else). But then we have slipped back into the polytheism of three different Gods, each a subsisting individual related to the other two. This is why Aquinas must take the radical step of claiming that the divine persons are relations that do not relate anything. Turner puts it this way: "there is nothing here but the relatings, no somewhats doing the relating." He goes on to say, "The language strains," but he also suggests that, although "bent and twisted," the language does not break: it allows Aquinas to avoid "gross inconsistency" in asserting the doctrine of the Trinity.

It may be that the bending and twisting of language avoids inconsistency. But at best it does so by leaving the doctrine of the Trinity with no meaning at all. As Turner also says, "the meanings of 'person' and 'threeness' [and, I would add, 'relation'] migrate off the semantic map of our secular vocabularies" and into a realm of "utter unknowability" or "unutterable mystery." Turner insists that "for Thomas, the doctrine of the Trinity is not incoherent nonsense." But, although it's not random babbling, it provides no meaning that removes the apparent contradiction of the doctrine. How could it, since, as Turner says, it presents the doctrine as "utterly unknowable"? If Aquinas had shown that the doctrine is not self-contradictory, then we would at least know that much about it.

Turner, however, tries to celebrate this bleak result. Speaking not only of the doctrines I've discussed but also of Christian teachings on Christology and the Eucharist, he says, "It is characteristic of the logic of these core doctrines that theirs is a vocabulary, a way of speaking of God, that, in the end, witnesses to its own depletion." Theological language begins from concrete experiences (moral choices, love for Jesus, receiving the Sacraments), but at the "last moment" when that language "reaches into God" it loses "that grip on its object that the secure logic of affirmation and negation" provides. At this point, Turner turns to Wittgensteinian language: "For Thomas the ladder of language that ascends to God rests securely on its foundations in our human worldly experience; but the ladder being climbed, God is reached only when it is ultimately cast away: and that is the 'mystical,' as Wittgenstein somewhat opaquely puts it." According to Turner, this is a positive development. It is a "conceptual ground-clearing" that opens up space for a "positive theology" that, "no longer entangled in the logician's dilemma," can move unimpeded to an "understanding of the relation between creature and Creator."

Here, however, Turner fails to face up to the challenge to theological language that his brilliant exposition of Thomas's thought poses. For, as we have seen in the three examples of immortality, creation, and the divine nature, what Aquinas has "cleared away" are not the obstacles to a theological understanding of these doctrines but rather the very possibility of such an understanding. He leaves us with an analysis that avoids self-contradiction only by taking us beyond the limits of meaning, unable to judge whether resurrection, creation, and the Trinity even make enough sense to be judged true or false.

The conclusion to draw from this is not that we should simply reject the doctrines. The solution lies rather in the principle of the unity of truth, which Aquinas asserts as a general proposition but fails to apply in the case of the "mysteries" of faith. According to the principle, when two apparent truths conflict, they cannot both be correct, but there is no reason that an apparently revealed truth must trump an apparent truth of natural reason. A well-grounded truth of reason may require us to modify or reject what we had thought was a revealed truth. If we find, as he did, that careful formulation of what we think a revealed truth means leads to absurdity, we should then conclude that the truth does not mean what we thought it did. The task then is to reformulate, not to try to convince ourselves that our failure to understand is a higher form of understanding. ■

Gary Gutting *holds the Notre Dame Endowed Chair in Philosophy. He writes regular columns for "The Stone," the* New York Times *philosophy blog.*

Michael O. Garvey

God & the Desert

Darling
A Spiritual Autobiography
Richard Rodriguez
Viking, $26.95, 256 pp.

"I really don't know how to explain it," Archbishop Anthony Bloom said, "but it seems to me that the word 'belief' is misleading. It gives the impression of something optional, which is within our powers to choose or not. What I feel very strongly about it is that I believe because I know that God exists, and I'm puzzled how you manage not to know." This was forty-some years ago, and the Orthodox priest was a guest on a BBC television program, in respectful conversation with a similarly respectful atheist.

Richard Rodriguez doesn't really know how to explain it either. "Our lives are so similar, my friends' and mine," he writes. "The difference between us briefly flares—like the lamp in my bedroom—only when I publish a religious opinion." He refers to the flare that had awakened him one night, afflicting him with the certainty that his mother had died.

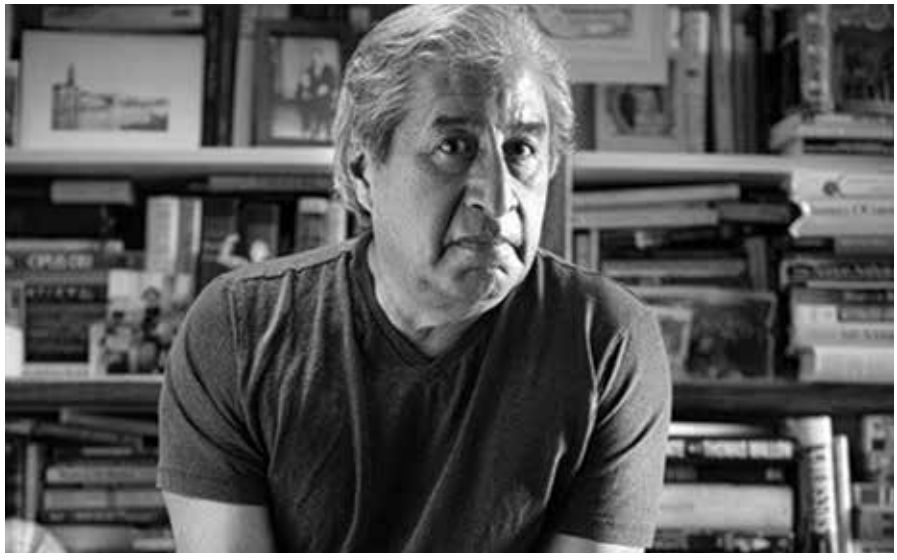
Rodriguez's *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography* is a collection of ten numinous essays, published in various publications over the years since that bright autumn morning when a band of airliner-hijacking jihadis afflicted our world with a related certainty. It is eclectic in a way with which all of us Rodriguez fans are familiar: there is superb travel writing here, some wry fun poked at the green movement, a profound reflection on how heterosexual women have midwifed the emancipation of gay men, and even a paradoxically reverent deconstruction of César Chávez. And whether or not that subtitle is strictly accurate, there is enough honest puzzlement, enough articulate bewilderment in every sentence to provide a compelling glimpse, if not a well-shaped narrative, of a man's spiritual life.

The man is a Catholic, Mexican-American, homosexual, baby-boomer Californian public intellectual, beholding, among other astonishments, "the dawn of a worldwide religious war that Americans prefer to name a war against terror," and knowing a soul-kinship with young men who sang prayers to God while they slaughtered innocents in a cornflower-blue Manhattan sky: "I do not believe what the destroyers believed—that God is honored by a human oath to take lives. I do not believe that God can be dishonored. The action of the terrorists was a human action, conceived in error—a benighted act. And yet I worship the same God as they, so I stand in some relation to those men."

Rodriguez stands in such relation—not only to holy warriors, but to culture warriors, to Saints Francis of Assisi and Thérèse of Lisieux, to the pedophile priests and their fatuous bishops, to the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence—as a son of one of the three desert religions fathered by Abraham. His doubt-seasoned Catholic belief reveals the time he inhabits as out of joint, freeing him from what Chesterton called "the degrading slavery of being a child of his age." He's as free as a suicide bomber, this master of the literary essay.

"To speak of the desert God is to risk blasphemy," he writes, "because the God of the Jews and the Christians and the Muslims is unbounded by time or space, is everywhere present—exists as much in a high mountain village in sixteenth-century Mexico as in tomorrow's Jakarta, where Islam thrives as a tropical religion." The remark is from "Jerusalem and the Desert," a *Harper's* magazine piece on a visit to the Holy Land. This essay also includes a passage, too long to quote here, which is (in the humble opinion of at least one reader) as fine an account of God's encounter with Abraham as any to be found outside Genesis 18:1–2. The Holy Land, where Christian monks of various denominations squabble over custody of a piece of real estate whose sole significance is that Jesus is not there, where Muslims insist that there is no god but God and that it is better to pray than to sleep, is also where, Rodriguez observes, "the desert encourages a sense of rebuff and contest with the natural world. Jesus cursed the recalcitrant fig tree right down to firewood."

That desert, and so the God revealed there, are never very far from these pages, as when Rodriguez travels to Las Vegas during Holy Week to visit the deathbed of a friend and notices, along with an intimate reiteration of Christ's



TIMOTHY ARCHIBALD / COURTESY OF PENGUIN GROUP

Richard Rodriguez

passion, how "a vacation city must be defiant of death, Las Vegas doubly so, for it is a city built on a desolate landscape. My predicament is that I am here for death, and the city of distraction is in my way."

All the essays in *Darling* concern that predicament, the distraction the Fathers of the Desert knew and named as demonic, which occludes the experience of true presence and therefore prevents one from keeping company with God. No wonder differences flare up from time to time with nonbelieving friends. How do they manage not to care?

In the last essay, "The Three Ecologies of the Holy Desert," Rodriguez embeds a splendid memory when a moment of grace evaporates distraction. It involves his friend Wayne, a San Francisco beggar, whom he has spotted on the sidewalk just as "several things happen simultaneously": an old man nearby, another street denizen, begins to sing "When You're Smiling," a young man appears suddenly and seats himself next to Wayne proffering a pink box of doughnuts and a cup of coffee, and then

> Wayne smiles with pleasure, catches my eye as he reaches for a doughnut, and is momentarily connected to the old man singing "When You're Smiling," for he and the other—the doughnut bringer—in mock-mockery, begin to sway to the cadence of the song like two bluebirds on a bough in a silly old cartoon. The sun, too, now seems a simple enough phenomenon—cadmium yellow pouring onto the pavement. A passerby drops a bill into Wayne's cup and Wayne nods and smiles (and looks over to me). I smile. The design—tongue and groove—of a single moment....
>
> But here's the thing: Wayne's smile.
>
> I have thought about this for twenty years or more. Wayne's smile said: Do you get it? Wayne's smile said: Remember this moment, it contains everything.

Those moments when the desert God smiles: to notice them is, of course, a blessing, but to remember, retrieve, and convey them is literary work. We should be grateful to Rodriguez for working so hard. ■

Michael O. Garvey *works in public relations at the University of Notre Dame.*

LETTERS continued from page 4

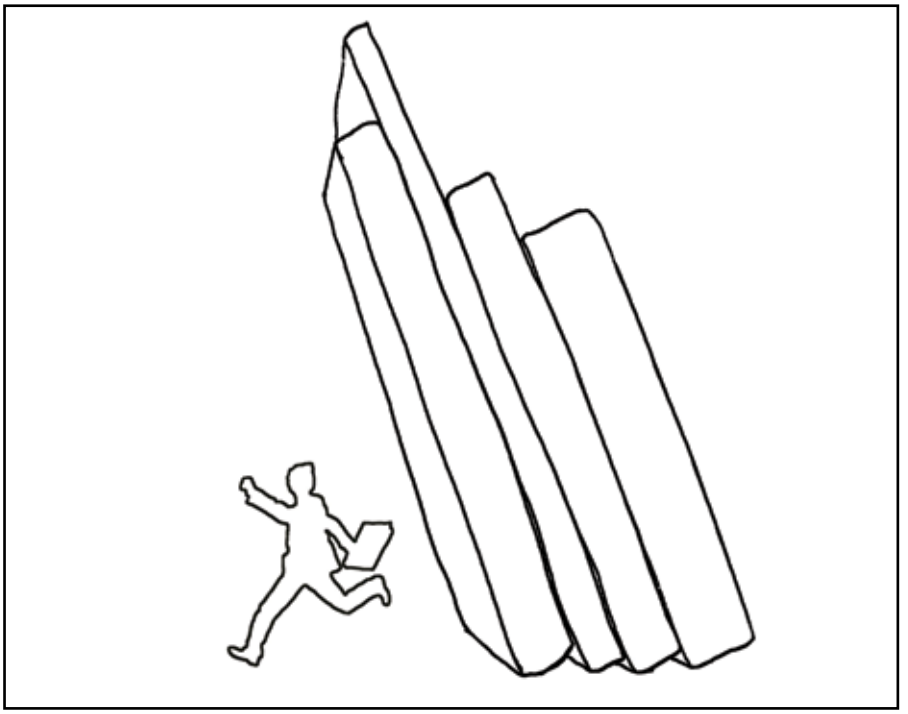
to read Augustine's *Confessions* in my first year at West Point—a major milestone in my conversion and in my spiritual life. From his good example, I briefly considered becoming an Army chaplain, but ultimately left the Academy for ministry. I was sad to learn this week that, about a month after I read the article, Fr. Wood passed away after suffering a stroke on March 21—the date on the issue in which his photograph appears.

BR. ERIK LENHART, OFM
Jamaica Plain, Mass.

DEVIL'S DUE

Regarding John Wilkins's article on the canonization of John Paul II and John XXIII ("The Odd Couple," April 11): Pope John Paul II eliminated the office of devil's advocate from the canonization process—the equivalent of having a prosecution without a prosecutor, only an attorney for the defense. Until there is a devil's advocate again, I do not see how we can have any legitimate canonization.

CONCHITA RYAN COLLINS
Teaneck, N.J.



SARAH BAUMANN

Splitting Up

Ellen B. Koneck

Our first split wasn't a conscious decision, given the lack of brain development or will power at that early stage in gestation, when a single fertilized egg divided into Emily and me.

I suppose our second real split came at about five and a half years. Twins at my elementary school had to decide before beginning kindergarten whether they always wanted to be in the same class or always in different classes. Though I don't know precisely why we chose separate classes, I have a strong feeling it had something to do with collectively making the highest possible number of friends.

Whatever the impetus for the split, it worked in our favor early on: instead of all the mind-blowingly awesome toys I could have brought to Ms. Ostlund's kindergarten for show-and-tell (my battery-operated Power Rangers glove comes immediately to mind), I dedicated my ten minutes in the spotlight to showing off My Identical Twin Sister, Emily.

Maybe it's obvious given my inclination to show-and-tell her, but Emily and I have always been the best-friends kind of twins. Some twins are competitive; they seem out to prove the egg didn't split evenly, if you know what I mean. Some are so eager to develop distinct identities that (it seems to me, as an insider) one twin will cultivate habits merely as a reaction against the other's: *I don't even like tennis, but dammit, I will not be known as "the lacrosse-playing-twins" if my life depends on it.* Every once in a while, there are twins who decide not to have separate identities at all: *My name is actually pronounced "The Smith Twins"—thanks.*

We had heard rumors of this last type of twins: they attended the same college, roomed together, and, upon love and marriage, cohabited a duplex. When their spouses died, they pulled out the ol' bunk beds—wombmate to roommate to tombmate. Hyperbole aside, my sister and I recognized the ease with which we too could slip into never-being-apart, and decided to address that possibility by deliberately choosing different colleges and finding out what non-twin living was all about.

This was by far our most significant split—not simply a different classroom across the hallway, but different cities, friends, lives.

Our breakup, so to speak, wasn't hostile: "It's not you. Well, it's not me either. It's the 'us' that needs…space," we said in perfect, twinny unison.

Life without Emily nearby was different in surprising ways. An uncomfortable feeling arose within me when I met and introduced myself to people who didn't just *know* I was a twin. Where we grew up, our teachers, classmates, teammates, and friends didn't have to meet both of us to *know about* both of us. I suddenly heard myself blurt: "And you should know, I have a twin sister and her name is Emily. That's important." To not have her known

by people who knew me gave me the sense that my identity was somehow compromised: How could you really know Ellen without at least knowing *about* Emily?

I persevered through the discomfort of these newfangled "singular introductions" and eventually broke the habit of speaking in the plural (though I admit I still sometimes show unrequested pictures of Emily to new people—it's compulsive!).

As for the split: it did what it was supposed to. We graduated from separate colleges; I got married and forsook the last name of my original mate, and she moved across the country. We never shared an apartment or took a class together, despite probably preferring each other to all other roommates and classmates.

After six years apart, as we were beginning to think ourselves doomed to a long-distance relationship, we both stumbled into one of the densest cities in the world. Call it divine providence, twin magnetism, or subconscious separation anxiety, but nowadays we're a thousand miles from home and a mere five miles from each other in New York City.

A few days after I moved here, she insisted I come visit her office to meet her friends and coworkers—which, I learned, is just the grown-up version of inviting me for show-and-tell. ■

Ellen B. Koneck *is* Commonweal*'s editorial assistant.*

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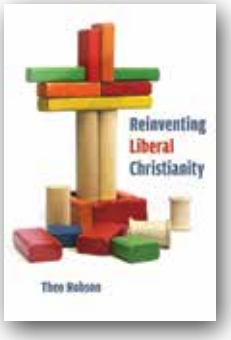

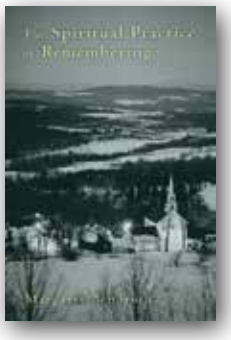

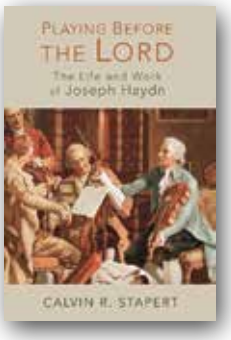

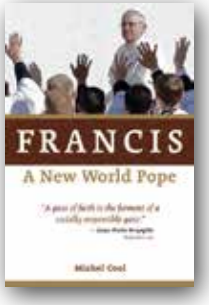

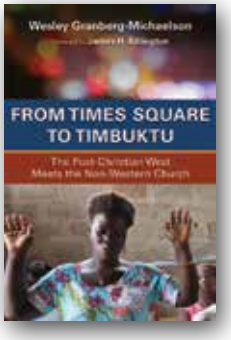

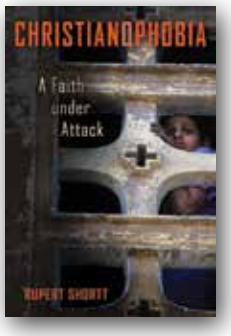

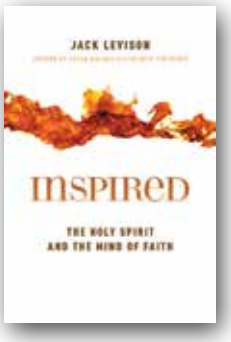

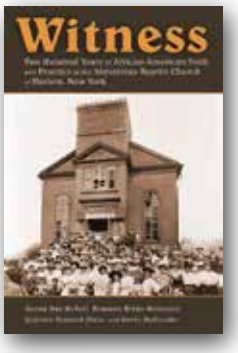

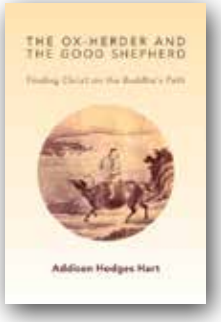

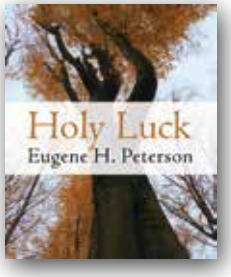

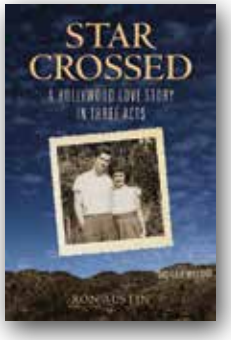

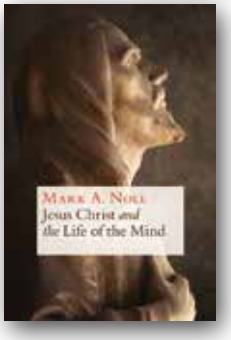

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