The Christian Century

January 2024

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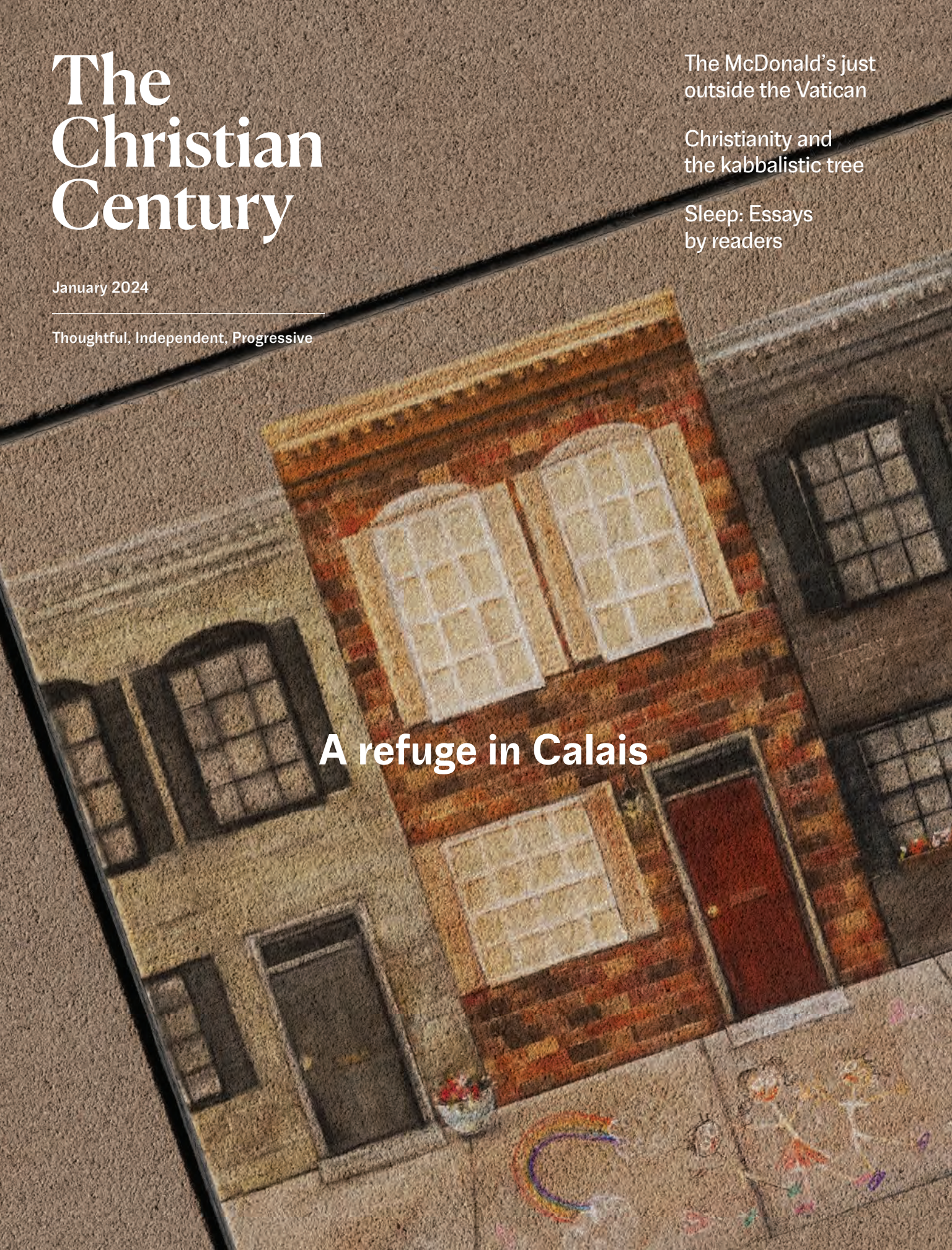
The McDonald's just outside the Vatican

Christianity and the kabbalistic tree

Sleep: Essays by readers



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False prophets and their dog whistles

Jesus warned of them and the fruit they bear.

by Peter W. Marty

Peter W. Marty is the CENTURY*'s editor/publisher.*

In the summer of 1876, in a workshop on the outskirts of London, Francis Galton was busy fashioning brass tubing into an ultrasonic whistle. This unique sliding whistle would produce high-pitched sounds at frequencies above the limit of human hearing. Galton tested his invention on the streets of London by blowing it near dogs and charting their reactions. Today, many hunters and dog trainers swear by modern iterations of this original whistle.

By the late 20th century, the term *dog whistle* referred as well to a kind of political statement that bears coded language. Dog whistle political messaging involves language that may sound innocent but is in fact carefully calculated: it carries one meaning for the general population but a secondary meaning to a targeted subgroup. Although leaders from across the political spectrum use dog whistles to stir associations among different audiences, the nefarious tactic of stoking racial prejudice by encouraging White voters to perceive Black and Brown populations as a threat belongs almost exclusively to right-wing politicians and propaganda outlets.

The intentional use of abstract code language to hide racist appeals below the surface gives dog whistle messaging its disturbing cleverness. As long ago as 1981, GOP strategist Lee Atwater noted this abstraction in an interview in which he discussed Richard Nixon's southern strategy and its evolution in the tax cut policies of the 1980s:

> You start out in 1954 by saying, "ni**er, ni**er, ni**er." By 1968, you can't say "ni**er"—that hurts you. Backfires. So, you say stuff like forced busing, states' rights, and all that stuff. You're getting so abstract now, you're talking about cutting taxes. . . . I'm saying that it is getting that abstract, and that coded, that we are doing away with the racial problem one way or the other. . . . "We want to cut this" is much more abstract than even the busing thing, and a hell of a lot more abstract than "ni**er, ni**er."

Among those turning to dog whistles nowadays, the GOP's most popular presidential candidate has all but mastered the tactic. With what appears to be deep personal satisfaction, Donald Trump regularly sprinkles dehumanizing and hate-filled lines into his speeches, only to pivot quickly away from accepting responsibility for any harm they encourage.

So, where can we find a word that names the scourge of dog whistle politics, one that calls out the threat it poses to democracy and a pluralistic society? Going straight to Jesus is one option: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns or figs from thistles?" (Matt. 7:15–16).

We can't know exactly who the false prophets were to whom Jesus refers. But his warning of their pernicious behavior is unmistakable. It's not difficult to parse his words: They're looking to take advantage of you. They will consume your soul. Their outward appearance may seem harmless and righteous, but that's only because they don a sheep's coat to look innocent and respectable. Their inward strategy is voracious. Their mission is deadly. They are deceptive to the core.

By all accounts, Francis Galton was a brilliant polymath. His groundbreaking discoveries in cartography, meteorology, psychology, and statistics set him apart from some of Europe's best. But his pioneering work in the field of eugenics—he coined the term itself in 1883—taints his legacy. As Galton was busy constructing a racial hierarchy with White people at the top, he was also in his workshop building a whistle that would do more than produce sounds beyond human hearing. He was creating a device that would provide the subtle undertones of racial animus for generations to come.

We shall be known by our fruits. ❑

AGATA NOWICKA

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"Jesus is not following John's warm-up act. He's picking up the mantle of a fallen hero."

—Benjamin J. Dueholm, *page 27*

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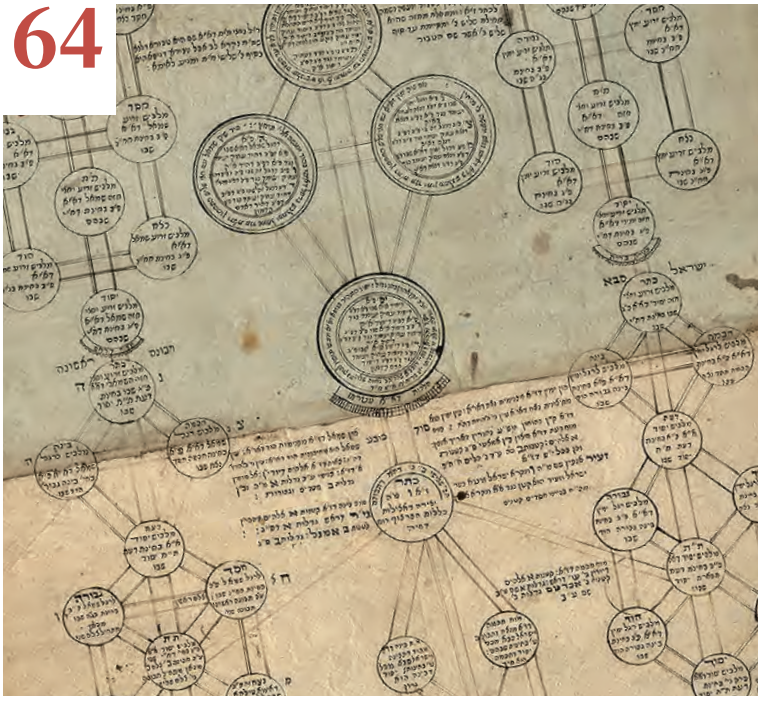

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The Christian Century

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We welcome responses to our articles. Email us at letters@christiancentury.org or join the conversation on Twitter (@ChristianCent) or Facebook (@ChristianCenturyMagazine).

Two stories in Israel-Palestine

I am grateful for the balanced "two stories" editorial looking at the horrors unfolding in Israel/Gaza today ("Bearing witness to multiple stories," December). Those of us in the West are, in general, woefully ignorant of the lengthy and complicated histories of this fraught area of the world. Yet despite that ignorance, we are quick to hold up one story against the other, assuming only one is right. To support Palestinian aspirations is not automatically antisemitism, nor is support for Israel's right to live in peace and security automatically blind pro-Israel bias. Thank you for what one may hope is the starting place for some semblance of a resolution of the current disaster.

—John Holbert
Los Angeles, CA

Thank you for this piece. I especially appreciated your pointing out that neither side has anyone with whom to negotiate: not Hamas, and not the current head of state in Israel. I think we all once imagined the United Nations to be such a body, but that has proven not to be true. Thank you again for moving forward on this piece—given that, as Jon Mathieu mentioned in your Editors' Picks newsletter, there is no simple consensus among the CENTURY editors on this difficult topic.

—Janelle Curlin-Taylor
Austin, TX

As Christians, I think our commitment to the idea that the last shall be first requires that any evaluation of a situation begins with the question, "Who are the least of these here?"

The Jewish people have indeed suffered from generational trauma, discrimination, and extreme religious persecution over the

centuries. When one looks more closely at the reason Israelis are *now* under constant risk of attack, however, it is because their government has long perpetuated a system of grave injustice, enforced poverty, and humiliation—not because they are Jewish and have endured a history of anti-Judaism, as your editorial seems to say. Israel's military force, support from the United States, and wealth exceed Gazans' beyond comparison. Gazans cannot "negotiate" while the much stronger party has a foot on their neck. Your comments about Palestinians' unwillingness to negotiate simply perpetuate a tired and false argument—one that the Israeli government uses as an excuse for its continued oppression of the Palestinian people.

There are indeed multiple stories in this conflict—thousands of them—but they are not equivalent stories.

There are indeed multiple stories in this conflict—thousands of them—but they are not equivalent stories. If we look honestly at this situation through a Christian lens, it is very clear that the people of Gaza are the last and the least in this context and that they deserve whatever support we may be able to give to them.

We can support no one who is currently wielding power in this situation. That includes Hamas, but first and foremost it includes the Israeli government.

—Dale Loepp
Berkeley, CA

More responses to our editorial

We received many more thoughtful and passionate responses to our December editorial on the multiple true stories behind the Israel-Hamas war than we have space to print. Most fell into the two broad categories represented above: those grateful for our approach and those who think we should have more fully articulated and advocated for the Palestinian cause.

In the first camp, Steven Brown of Port Charlotte, Florida, is disturbed by US military aid to Israel but thinks our balanced editorial serves CENTURY readers well. Richard Laibly of Cicero, Illinois, is a retired history teacher and commends us for the historical context we provided. We also heard from one convert to Islam—Jaycee Ali in Seattle—whose heart breaks for suffering innocents on both sides and who found our approach to be empathetic and refreshing.

Less pleased was Torrey Curtis of Weatherford, Oklahoma, who thought it lacked a true sense of proportionality. Craig Hunter of Denton, Texas, thought our analysis was missing a key reference point: international law. Other readers agreed that certain language or ideas were conspicuously absent: Joe Roos in Altadena, California, wanted to see a full-throated denunciation of the Israeli occupation as genocidal apartheid, and Sarah Reynolds in Washington, DC, was disappointed we did not critique the US government's role in the conflict.

We appreciate your feedback, even (or perhaps especially) when you disagree with us. Thank you for engaging with our work.

—*The Editors*

As I read your editorial, a few phrases gave me pause that I thought needed to be revisited:

"Fired thousands of rockets": I do not question the number, but the piece makes no mention of the difference between the weapons and firepower available to Hamas and those available to the Israeli Defense Forces. The IDF, thanks to almost $4 billion a year from the US in military aid, is the best-equipped military force in the Middle East.

"Israel was created": a phrase that begs the core question. It softens and elides the question by what right an imperial power expropriated land from the people who had lived on it and made that land available to others, however great their need. I certainly don't question the strong claim of Jews to a homeland, but the process by which it "was created" needs to be clarified and critiqued.

"Weak and ineffectual": if the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank is, in fact, "weak and ineffectual," it would be good to acknowledge the degree to which their options for exercising any authority have been severely limited by the Israeli government, recently recognized by many worldwide as an apartheid regime. The phrase sounds disturbingly like blaming the victim.

I'm a faithful and grateful reader of the CENTURY and trust your staff to treat explosive topics with discernment. I just don't want the urgency of this moment to get lost in efforts to be evenhanded.

—Marilyn McEntyre
Carmichael, CA

Pentecostalism in Argentina

I grew up in Colombia, where my parents were non-Pentecostal evangelical missionaries from 1939 to 1964. My anecdotal impression here in the US is that there is much overlap between Donald Trump supporters and Pentecostals. Reporting from Brazil appeared to show similar support among Pentecostals there for Jair Bolsonaro. Do Argentinian Pentecostals ("My Pentecostal kin," November) gravitate to similar right-wing authoritarian figures? I'm curious about Heidi Neumark's thoughts on evangelicals' and Pentecostals' susceptibility to authoritarian solutions that promise to align the culture with their worldviews. In Argentina, has previous involvement in Catholic base communities modified this tendency and encouraged solidarity?

—Fred Smith
Newton, MA

Mysteries of Mary Magdalene

VIA FACEBOOK After reading Amy Frykholm's interview with Elizabeth Schrader Polczer ("Signs of Mary Magdalene in John 11," November), I reviewed Bruce Metzger's *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. According to Metzger, it doesn't appear there are any manuscripts which don't include the name Martha, and the best reading is "the Martha-and-Mary." While this reading is a bit awkward, it is "supported by early and weighty evidence," following the criterion that the harder reading is most likely correct. Polczer's assertion that "in Luke 10, Mary and Martha don't have a brother" is an assumption made from silence, but there could easily be other reasons the text doesn't mention their brother Lazarus. Polczer's conclusions seem to be driven by an agenda to establish a feminist reading of the text. Looks like eisegesis to me.

—Morgan Trotter

VIA FACEBOOK Thanks for your interest in my work! My text-critical research in the *Harvard Theological Review* is actually far more detailed than Metzger's pocket commentary. Even though several of the earliest manuscripts of John 11 clearly show the name "Mary" changed to "Martha," and even though several scholars commented on the textual problem in the 1960s, Metzger did not address this in his commentary. I encourage you to read my peer-reviewed article for yourself; it's quite clear that there is a major textual problem related to Martha's presence throughout the transmission of John 11 and 12. After you read the paper, I'd be curious about your thoughts.

—Elizabeth Schrader Polczer

For centuries, men have been trying to "make the church safe for misogyny," as David Bentley Hart puts it in his note on Junia.

Polczer's scholarship shows Mary Magdalene being dislodged from the crucial narrative in John 11 in favor of the mythical Martha. Her discovery is stunning but not surprising.

For centuries, men have been trying to "make the church safe for misogyny," as David Bentley Hart puts it in his note on Junia in his New Testament translation. When Paul wrote Romans 16:7, he named Junia an apostle—and ever since, men have been trying to prove that she was male. And Mary Magdalene is known as "the apostle to the apostles" for good reason. The Holy Spirit has been breathing new life in the church, with women serving in ordained ministry at all levels. Hope abounds! Sterling scholarship, Dr. Polczer!

—Earl Grout
Seattle, WA

American Magnificat

Your December issue spoke of Mary's Magnificat ("A rich woman who took the Magnificat seriously"). I wish you had mentioned the only successful American politician of the last century who actually used the Magnificat as a platform for his programs: Huey Long of Louisiana, governor and later US senator. Long built hospitals for the poor, paved roads so farmers could transport their produce, gave free textbooks to school kids, built toll-free bridges across the Mississippi, and—incredibly for a successful southern politician at the time—insisted that the textbooks be available to Black as well as White students. He was far from flawless, but he delivered what he promised: he brought down the rich and lifted up the poor. And the poor loved him for it. The rich and powerful feared and hated him. He was assassinated. But he ought not be forgotten.

—Dave McConnell
Bozeman, MT

The absurdity of originalism

In *Rahimi*, the Supreme Court seems to have glimpsed the problems with its own *Bruen* decision on guns. Should we be relieved?

It's hard to imagine a more straightforward case. In November, the US Supreme Court heard oral arguments in *United States v. Rahimi*. A man convicted of domestic violence, along with multiple other gun-related crimes, wants his guns back, and the justices seemed to agree that he was too dangerous to have them. The court appears likely to uphold the 1994 law prohibiting dangerous individuals involved in domestic abuse cases from obtaining and possessing guns. Rarely has the Supreme Court been handed a case with so little nuance.

But this case was brought to the court because of its own far more sweeping decision last year in *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association Inc. v. Bruen*. In that case, the court ruled 6–3 that a gun law is unconstitutional unless similar laws existed in the era of the Constitution's framing. There were no bans on gun possession by domestic abusers in 1791. Domestic abuse was not part of the cultural consciousness, and women were considered property. If we go looking for an analogous law, as *Bruen* requires, we will come up empty. When the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals heard the *Rahimi* case, its logical conclusion was that *Bruen* had made the 1994 law unconstitutional, so it overturned it.

There were no bans on gun possession by domestic abusers in 1791. Women were considered property.

Judging by the questions justices asked in the *Rahimi* arguments, the Supreme Court seems to have glimpsed the absurdity of its earlier decision and is now seeking to limit the damage. We might breathe a sigh of relief.

But the broader understanding of history implied in *Bruen* creates further untenable chaos when applied to contemporary circumstances. In *Bruen* and in other landmark cases, the Roberts court has cited "history and tradition" in interpreting the Constitution—a phrase by which it appears to mean that unless the framers thought of it, the Constitution doesn't cover it. As journalist Jay Willis aptly asks, are we really going to make laws based on "whatever Clarence Thomas imagines that James Madison would have thought about it nearly 250 years ago"?

This originalism was confronted by Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, the Supreme Court's newest member. In oral arguments during *Rahimi*, Jackson did not disagree with the proposition that history matters. Instead she asked, whose history? "I'm a little troubled by having a history-and-traditions test that also requires some sort of culling of the history so that only certain people's history counts," she said. "Isn't that a flaw with respect to the test?"

When you consider the history of all of the people, the logic embedded in *Bruen* reveals itself. In 1791, women were property, Black people were slaves, Native people were considered less than human. The only history that matters in *Bruen* is that of White, male, landowning Protestants—and if we rely on that history alone, Zackey Rahimi gets to keep his guns, even if it means other people have to die. In *Rahimi*, the court has confronted its own logic and found it wanting. But there is no sign that *Rahimi* will transform *Bruen*'s vision of constitutional originalism. ❑

Seen & Heard

What the CC editors are reading and paying attention to

Newly available papyrus

A fragment of a page from a small ancient book offers a rare glimpse into the minds of early Christians. The newly edited and published fragment is part of the Oxyrhynchus collection, a cache of more than half a million fragments of papyri that were excavated over a century ago from ancient trash heaps in Egypt. Among them were a number of early Christian texts. What is so significant about this papyrus, according to editor Jeffrey Fish, "is that it contains sayings of Jesus which correspond partly to canonical gospels and partly to sayings we know only from the Gospel of Thomas." The fragment includes instruction not to worry about your life, food, or clothing and to emulate birds and their lack of cares. And as in the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus cautions people that even a rich man who amassed wealth still met death (*Daily Beast*, August 31).

War on earth

An international coalition of environmental advocacy groups has asked the International Criminal Court to begin collecting information about how climate change is affecting the world's conflicts. Spearheaded by the Sudan Human Rights Hub and Climate Counsel, the coalition warned that "nearly every geopolitical crisis on Earth is now marked in one way or another by environmental strife." It named several examples, including conflicts in the Lake Chad basin, Ukraine, and Afghanistan (*Inside Climate News*, October 26).

Asylum in America

People who are arrested for crossing into the US illegally have a year to apply for asylum. More than

800,000

people applied for asylum last year. That's

63%

more than the previous year. There are

659

immigration judges and about

800

asylum officers who make decisions about asylum claims. More than

2 million

people in the US are waiting to find out if they will be granted asylum. The average wait time is

3 years.

SOURCE: *New York Times*

Vatican goes electric

The Vatican has announced a deal with Volkswagen to replace the city-state's entire car fleet with electric vehicles by 2030. The partnership is one way the Vatican aims to reach a long-term goal of relying exclusively on renewable energy. It will also build a network of electric charging stations inside its walls and at its properties in Rome. Employees will be allowed to use these for their private cars, another incentive to move away from fossil fuels. It was not clear if the deal with Volkswagen will also cover "popemobiles," the specially built vehicles that transport the pope through crowds in St. Peter's Square (Reuters, November 15).

Displaced children

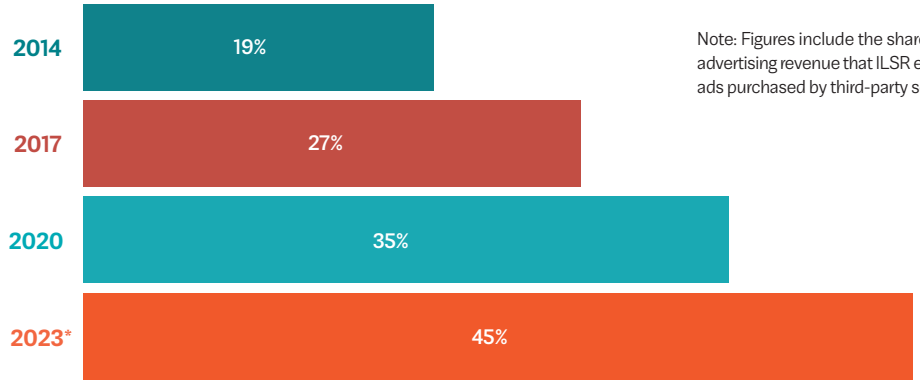
The civil war in Sudan began when fighting broke out on April 15 in the country's capital of Khartoum. Since then, at least 9,000 civilians have been reported killed and more than 12,000 injured, though the true number is likely far higher. In November UNICEF issued a report calling Sudan the "largest child displacement crisis in the world," with more than 3 million children forced to flee their homes and 14 million children in need of life-saving humanitarian assistance. "We cannot allow the death and suffering of millions of children in Sudan to become another forgotten humanitarian catastrophe," UNICEF said in its report (*Vox*, November 8).

End times politics

The day after Hamas attacked Israel, Greg Laurie, senior pastor at Harvest Riverside Fellowship in California, framed the violence in terms of end times prophecy: "The Bible tells us in the End Times that Israel will be scattered and regathered," Laurie said, adding, "If you get up in the morning and read . . . 'Russia Attacks Israel,' fasten your seatbelt because you're seeing Bible prophecy fulfilled in your lifetime." Ideas about end times prophecy have gone through cycles of popular acceptance among US evangelicals. In the most widely known version, Israel is a linchpin to the events of "the last days," and after the rapture, 144,000 Jews are to be converted to Christianity before eternity begins. Evangelical

Amazon's "partners"

In nine years, the share Amazon takes from third-party sellers in fees went up 137 percent. The company now keeps 45 cents of each dollar.



Note: Figures include the share of Amazon's advertising revenue that ILSR estimates from ads purchased by third-party sellers.

*Based on the first two quarters of 2023

Source: Institute for Local Self-Reliance, September 21 / Amazon 10-K filings

Christian pastors have long pushed the US to help hasten such events. The US embassy's move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, for example, was the fulfillment of a promise Donald Trump made during the 2016 campaign, one applauded by pro-Israel evangelicals (RNS, November 17).

Bad liars

In November the House Committee on Ethics found that Rep. George Santos had engaged in "knowing and willful violations of the Ethics in Government Act." The committee introduced a motion to expel Santos from Congress, in large part for his "constant stream of lies." Political philosopher Michael Blake wonders why, if voters have mostly made peace with deceptive campaign practices and dissembling politicians, the case of George Santos resulted in such a rare sanction. He suspects it's because Santos's lies were so head-scratchingly unnecessary and easily disprovable. Santos lied about matters as irrelevant to effective statecraft as having been a star player for Baruch College's volleyball team. (He didn't even go to Baruch.) Voters may have accepted that their representatives will be "imperfectly honest," says Blake, "but candidates who are both liars and bad at lying can find no such justification, since they are unlikely to be believed and thus incapable of achieving those goods that justify their deception." Even if we have made peace with liars, we

"I wanted to take mental illnesses and emotional disorders out of the closet, to let people know it is all right to admit having a problem without fear of being called crazy."

—former first lady Rosalynn Carter (1927–2023), an early advocate for destigmatizing mental illness

TINY EXCERPT

By 1908, only 25 free-ranging buffalo remained in the United States. . . .

But the land still holds buffalo memory. Buffalo roll on the ground over and over to groom, to keep cool, to repel insects; this practice is sometimes called dust bathing, but most commonly, wallowing. Wallowing indents into the soil concave depressions that measure about ten feet in diameter. Animals will reuse one another's wallows until they become too soggy and are abandoned. But even then, the wallows still maintain, for more than a hundred years, ecosystems that differ from the surrounding landscapes. . . . I have read of ancient wallows that never dry out—seeded with plants from other places that arrived on the hides of bison past.

—Anna Badkhen, ***Emergence*** (October 19)

"If the status quo continues, the days ahead will be driven by an ongoing war of narratives over who is entitled to hate more and kill more."

—Jordanian king Abdullah II, in an op-ed calling for a two-state solution in Israel-Palestine (*Washington Post*, November 14)

resent those who are really bad at it (*The Conversation*, November 21).

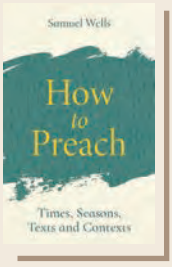
Bin Laden goes viral

More than 21 years after its writing, Osama bin Laden's incendiary "Letter to America" went viral on TikTok after the text was removed from the website of the *Guardian*, where it had become a top-trending link. Subsequent reporting on this trend indicated that the TikTok videos of young people sharing sympathy for bin Laden's views of America were amplified when shared on X by journalist Yashar Ali. His post was viewed more than 32 million times, compared to 2 million total views for TikToks using the #lettertoamerica hashtag, which was later removed from the platform. But Gen Z's original fascination with the bin Laden document seems to have been organic. One influencer said she had seen clips encouraging people to read "Letter to America" at least a week before it went viral (*Rolling Stone*, November 15).

One-woman jubilee

About nine months before Casey McIntyre died of ovarian cancer, her husband came across the story of a North Carolina church that purchased nearly $15,048 in a "debt jubilee." While undergoing cancer treatment, the couple chose to make monthly donations to RIP Medical Debt, the same nonprofit organization that partnered with the church. When McIntyre died at home November 12, donations from friends and strangers started pouring in. Her husband said when people walk into her memorial they may be overwhelmed with grief, but they will leave knowing they wiped out millions in medical debt for others (*Washington Post*, November 18).

TINY EXCERPT



The end of the world isn't a random moment when an arbitrary God, in a fit of petulance, loses patience with the world and sends everyone upstairs to bed without their dinner. The end of the world is where God started. The purpose of creation was to lay the foundations and set out the ingredients for the end of the world. As soon as God involved us in the story . . . we were always going to need an end of the world to draw together all the good parts and redeem all the bad parts and make a true and wondrous world in which we could be God's companion forever. . . . Jesus is the end of the world.

—Samuel Wells, ***How to Preach: Times, Seasons, Texts, Contexts*** (Canterbury Press)

A plague of loneliness

The World Health Organization has declared loneliness to be a pressing global health concern—as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. While loneliness is often seen as a problem in developed countries in particular, US surgeon general Vivek Murthy said the rates among older people are similar across the world. In older adults, loneliness is associated with increased risk of dementia, heart disease, and stroke. Younger people experiencing loneliness are more likely to drop out of school and face poor economic outcomes. The new global commission will run for three years (*Guardian*, November 16).

Coworking at church

When the leaders of Church of the Advent in Cincinnati hired Schickel Design to draft plans for the renovation of the extensive non-worship spaces of their building, Schickel's president, Rebecca Dorff Cadena, had an idea for a coworking space and coffee house that also offered onsite child care. The project is called Caalma—short for Casa de Alma, or home of the soul. Dan Carlson, Advent's priest-in-charge, said that Cardena's vision fit in well with what he described as "a new concept of village life" and the church's mission to better use its building. The renovated space offers a welcoming invitation to the neighborhood and has the potential to create new income streams for the church (Episcopal News Service, November 7).

The worm and the meatball

The iconic NASA logo known as "the worm"—the futuristic typeface created in 1975 and featuring A's that look like the nose cones of rockets—has returned. It was retired in 1992, when the agency revived the older version of the logo,

"Segregation in medicine was only abolished some 60 years ago. . . . It isn't far-fetched to think exploitation and neglect still pulsate through the veins of American medicine."

—educator and podcaster Efran Menny (*Black Catholic Messenger*, November 22)

known as "the meatball": the round, red, white, and blue insignia with a smattering of stars and a red comet circling the agency logo. Now NASA will be using both, acknowledging the nostalgic appeal of the worm for Gen X. "When we think of NASA, my generation thinks of the Space Shuttle and the worm," said graphic designer Hamish Smyth, who visited NASA headquarters in Washington, DC, with other artists to celebrate the return of the worm. In an aesthetic compromise, crew capsules will now feature meatballs, while the worm will appear on booster rockets. "Aesthetically, some might say they come from different planets," said NASA creative director David Rager, "but we found that with just the right balance they complement each other" (*New Yorker*, November 20).

AP PHOTO / K. M. CHAUDARY

Diwali lights
A woman holds a clay oil lamp during a ceremony to celebrate Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, at Krishna Temple in Lahore, Pakistan. Diwali celebrates the spiritual victory of light over darkness (AP, November 12).

The power of seltzer

*From David Roberts's interview with Ólafur Teitur Guðnason, head of communications for Carbfix, an Icelandic company that sequesters carbon dioxide by carbonating water and then injecting it into underground rock (*Volts *podcast, November 13).*

Roberts: When you carbonate the water, the physics of it, is it the same thing that's going on in a SodaStream?

Guðnason: It's not too different, in essence. We have a stream of CO_2, and then we shower it with water and pressurize so that it is completely dissolved. The difference is that we don't have the bubbles that you have in the SodaStream . . . because these bubbles, they mean that the gas is escaping the fluid, [and] we don't want it to escape. So we are putting more of it into the water and making sure it's completely dissolved so that it doesn't rise back to the surface. . . .

Roberts: Your mineralization process, by which the CO_2 is pulled out of the water and becomes rock, happens in two years, you say. Two years of the water being underground, all of the CO_2 will be pulled out of it and mineralized. So how is that happening so fast?

Guðnason: Well, you need favorable conditions. You need favorable rock formations that are highly porous and reactive. It was quite a surprise when the scientific studies showed the extent and speed of the mineralization. . . . A lot of it actually happens even sooner.

News

ISRAEL-PALESTINE

US Jews split on war, but support for Israel is high

by Yonat Shimron
Religion News Service

Crowds of supporters gather on the National Mall at the March for Israel on November 14.

AP PHOTO / MARK SCHIEFELBEIN

A November 15 vigil to honor the lives of Israelis and Palestinians killed in the Israel-Hamas war turned violent when police forcibly cleared the Democratic National Committee headquarters in Washington, DC, of mostly Jewish protesters.

Like many other protests that have arisen across the country since the October 7 attack by Hamas, the interfaith vigil, led by Jewish groups IfNotNow and Jewish Voice for Peace, demanded a cease-fire. The two groups have mounted numerous such protests, shutting down Grand Central Station in New York City and blocking traffic in other parts of the country.

At the November 15 event, a group of about 200 people tried to block the entrances of the Democratic National Committee so that Democratic representatives and candidates inside the building would have to walk past them on the way out.

"The intent was to make visible all of the lives lost and talk to elected officials who we knew would be there about a cease-fire," said Jessica Rosenberg, who serves on the rabbinical council of Jewish Voice for Peace and is also active with Rabbis for Ceasefire.

Coming one day after the massive March for Israel on the National Mall, the protest highlighted the growing tensions among US Jews over Israel and its retaliation for the incursion that killed more than 1,200 people, many of them civilians.

Both the crowds at the progressive Jewish-led protests and recent surveys suggest those tensions are largely generational. Younger Jews appear to be less connected to Israel than their elders and more inclined to support Palestinians.

A new poll of US Jews released November 16 by the nonpartisan Jewish Electorate Institute finds overwhelming support for President Biden's handling of the war—and significant support among younger, left-leaning Jews, though by smaller

margins. While 74 percent of all Jewish voters approve of the way Biden is handling the war between Israel and Hamas, 53 percent of Jewish voters age 18–38 supported Biden's approach, the poll found.

The poll results complicate the picture of a Jewish split on Israel. US Jews overall still vote Democratic, and differences over the war are unlikely to change that.

"The protests outside the Democratic National Committee building . . . are not reflective of younger Jewish opinion or broader Jewish opinion," said Jim Gerstein of GBAO Strategies, the group that conducted the poll on behalf of the Jewish Electorate Institute. "They're very supportive of the Democratic Party."

The poll also showed that support for Israel actually grew among younger Jews when compared to earlier polling.

Attachment to Israel among US Jews grew by 10 percentage points overall, rising from 72 to 82 percent between June and November, the poll found. Among Jews age 18–35, it grew from 57 percent in June to 66 percent in November.

Younger Jews, the poll found, broadly supported Biden's trip to Israel in October and even supported sending aircraft carriers to the region. They stood out from other Jews only in their support for a cease-fire.

"I think there are many Jews, particularly young, but not only, who just cannot attach their Jewish identity to this militarized state that has been occupying another people and oppressing them in really horrible ways," said Brant Rosen, who leads Tzedek Chicago, a mostly online congregation that uses the motto, "Judaism without nationalism." He did not participate in the DNC vigil.

The Jewish Electorate Institute poll was fielded November 5–9 among 800 US Jewish voters. It had a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percent. ❑

RNS national reporter Jack Jenkins contributed to this report.

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Fellowship inspired by Elie Wiesel models peacebuilding amid Israel-Hamas war

by Kathryn Post
Religion News Service

The United States was in the throes of the pandemic. Cities were roiling with Black Lives Matter protests while talk show hosts debated the validity of the 2020 election. Amid society's rifts, Juliana Taimoorazy—an Assyrian Christian, founder of the Iraqi Christian Relief Council, and self-described conservative—embraced conflict a step further: she joined a cohort of emerging leaders with opposing worldviews.

In any other context, such a gathering could easily combust or unravel. But under the attentive guidance of Ariel Burger, a lifelong student of Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel and author of *Witness: Lessons from Elie Wiesel's Classroom*, the cohort members not only sharpened their personal beliefs but also cultivated true friendships.

Disagreement, Taimoorazy learned, was an opportunity. "Learning to love one another despite our vast differences was something stark that I came out with," she said.

Grounded in teachings from Jewish mysticism and from Wiesel, the Witness Institute's fellowship program, which launched a beta version in 2020, is designed for emerging leaders seeking to develop understanding across differences. Burger teamed up with Wiesel's son, Elisha Wiesel, to establish the institute, which was envisioned as a project that would translate Elie Wiesel's teachings for a new generation.

Now in its third round of cohorts, the Witness Institute has had 28 fellows go through its 15-month program. The course employs art, storytelling, humor, and religious texts, equipping leaders to express their core beliefs while being open to those with conflicting views.

Amid disparate responses to the Israel-Hamas war, it's a strategy that current fellows are employing in real time.

© SARI GOODFRIEND

The Witness Institute fellows work together during a retreat at Trinity Retreat Center in West Cornwall, Connecticut, in August.

The Witness Institute fellows and program leaders together during a retreat in August

"It's so necessary right now to expand our trove of wisdom and tools to help us in moments of crisis in particular, and in conflict transformation, always," Burger said in an interview.

In the early 2000s, before heading to Boston University to get his PhD in religion and conflict transformation, Burger's classroom was the city of Jerusalem, where he participated in Israeli-Palestinian dialogue groups.

He observed two models: one that was secular, modern, Western, and built on concepts like natural law and human rights, and the other based on religious texts, traditions, and practices. The second approach was modeled by Palestinian Muslim sheik Ibrahim Abu el-Hawa and Israeli Orthodox rabbi Menachem Froman.

"They had a very playful and very close relationship. They would also sit on each other's laps and laugh together, and sing together and lead chants together with all of us. And that model really stayed with me," Burger said.

After four years of on-the-ground peacemaking, Burger concluded that the secular approach to dialogue is often less effective than strategies that build on religious texts, traditions, and lineages—which is why Burger has passed down this method via the Witness Institute.

One of the stories Burger uses to frame the fellowship is the Genesis creation account. According to the text, God creates Eve and calls her an *ezer k'negdo*, which in Hebrew, Burger said, means a "helper and connector who will be against him." Hasidic teachings suggest that, based on this concept, the role of a good friend, partner, or spouse is to challenge their counterpart from a place of compassion and shared purpose, refining their words and ideas.

"And so, in a certain way . . . every person on the other side of an issue or conflict can be seen as a teacher or a friend," Burger said.

Throughout the fellowship, stories like this function as a blueprint for productively engaging in dialogue.

Burger teaches fellows to begin a discussion by agreeing on what success looks like and to establish what to do if someone is triggered. During the exchange, Burger suggests addressing an interlocutor's strongest argument, leaving space so reaction becomes response, and even swapping ideological sides during the course of the dialogue. Afterward, he encourages discussion partners to reflect appreciation for one another, name points of unresolved conflict, quote their interlocutor first and positively when summarizing the discussion, and to physically shake out residual embodied tension.

As fellows from a plurality of perspectives learn to constructively disagree, each cohort is creating a small circle of influential leaders who are versed in Wiesel's teachings, knowledgeable about ancient wisdom traditions, and equipped to clarify conflicting ideas through dialogue.

Cohort after cohort, the institute aims to expand the circles of trust so their ripple effects impact society. That dynamic is already manifesting, on a small scale, in an all-cohorts group chat.

"We have an active Signal chat for all the fellows, and what's happening with Gaza and Israel right now, it's like a live session to apply these skills," said current fellow Laura Holford, a nurse and contemplative Christian from Sacramento. "People fall all over the spectrum in terms of how they engage with this conflict. So it's happening live right now, this chance to listen to each other."

In light of the conflict, Burger plans to hold a virtual meeting for current and former fellows to practice the tools they've learned for processing difficult emotions. He'll invite them to follow Elie Wiesel's call to "think higher, feel deeper" by leaning into the sensitivity they are feeling. He will challenge them to think with precision about sources of information they are trusting, how they are interpreting events, and how they are considering proposed policy solutions.

Burger admitted that this work is grueling and would be impossible without the community they've formed.

"We are all facing a choice right now, with peers and colleagues and friends: Will we lean in or will we lean out?" Burger said. "Will we choose to engage thoughtfully with the people around us who see things differently, people we know to be good and sincere? Or will we immediately write off anyone who doesn't adopt our particular dogma?" ❑

This story was supported by the Solutions Journalism Network, a nonprofit organization dedicated to rigorous and compelling reporting about responses to social problems.

ORTHODOX CHURCH

Native Alaskan healer named North America's first female saint in Orthodox Church

by Meagan Saliashvili
Religion News Service

A Native Alaskan midwife known for her love and care, especially toward abused women, has become the first female Orthodox Christian saint from North America after she was glorified at a meeting of bishops of the Orthodox Church in America in Chicago in November.

Expected for more than a year, Olga Michael's glorification is the result of a bottom-up process that begins with lay members' veneration and the gathering of accounts of holiness by a church committee. Unlike in Catholicism, the Orthodox do not require miracles to confirm a saint, though some women have credited Michael with miraculous intercessions.

On November 2, Bishop Alexei of Sitka and Alaska wrote a letter to the OCA's highest-ranking cleric, Metropolitan Tikhon, formally requesting that Michael be considered for sainthood.

"The first peoples of Alaska are convinced of her sanctity and the great efficacy of her prayers," he wrote.

The synod then agreed in a November 8 statement that "the time for the glorification of Matushka Olga has arrived, fulfilling the hopes and prayers of pious Orthodox Christians throughout Alaska and the entire world." "Matushka" is an honorific for priests' wives in the Russian Orthodox Church.

Michael, named Arrsamquq when she was born into the Yupik tribe in 1916, knitted mittens and sewed leather and fur boots for her rural Alaskan community and often gave away her family's few possessions to help others in need. She assisted pregnant women through childbirth and shared their joy and grief.

After an arranged marriage to a local hunter and fisherman who founded the village's first general store and post office before becoming a priest later in life, she gave birth to 13 children, only eight of whom survived to adulthood. Church accounts credit Michael's prayers for her husband's embrace of the church. She died in 1979.

Above all, Michael is remembered for helping abused women find spiritual healing. She invited them into the intimate space of a traditional wooden Yupik sauna, where conversation flowed freely.

Michael will officially become the 14th North American Orthodox Christian saint and the only woman in that group. Her ancestors reportedly converted to Orthodoxy after hearing the teachings of the Aleut missionary Iakov Netsvetov, now known as St. Jacob.

One popular icon depicting Michael shows her holding a scroll that reads, "God can create great beauty from complete desolation." The attribution comes from an anonymous woman from Ossining, New York, who said the saint visited her in a dream in the 1990s and healed her from years of trauma from childhood sexual abuse.

The woman, who later converted to Orthodoxy, hadn't heard of Michael, but her therapist recognized her description from *Orthodox Alaska: A Theology of Mission*, a book she had read by Michael Oleksa, an OCA priest and historian of Orthodox Native Alaskans who knew Michael.

"I've always thought if there is anyone I've known in my lifetime who would be glorified a saint, it would be Matushka Olga," Oleksa said.

Icons and murals of Michael's wrinkled face wrapped in a head scarf have increasingly appeared in

An undated photo and a depiction of Olga Michael of Alaska

COURTESY OF ORTHODOX CANADA

OBITUARY

R. Gustav Niebuhr

Richard Gustav Niebuhr, a pioneering Presbyterian journalist and scholar, died October 20 at age 68 from long-term complications from Parkinson's disease.

Niebuhr began his journalism career in 1980 at the *Berkshire Eagle* in Massachusetts. He then worked at the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* before successfully lobbying the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* to hire him to cover religion and politics in 1986.

In successive stints at the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*, and as an occasional guest on NPR, Niebuhr explored the broad impact of religion on society in the US and globally.

In 2001, Niebuhr moved to academia as a scholar in residence at what is now the Center for Culture, Society, and Religion at Princeton University. In 2004, he joined the faculty of Syracuse University, later becoming an associate professor of religion and the media. Niebuhr taught and lectured widely, including at Union Theological Seminary and Princeton Theological Seminary, and in Japan for the US Department of State.

Niebuhr came from a family that exerted an outsized influence on American religious thought. He was the grandson of theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, the great-nephew of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, and the son of Harvard Divinity School professor Richard R. Niebuhr. ❑

—Mike Ferguson,
Presbyterian News Service

churches across the United States, adding to her case for sainthood and indicating that bishops believed her glorification was imminent. In the remote region around Kodiak, Alaska, Native Alaskans have never stopped venerating her.

"For us, it's very significant. We've been waiting for this," said Deborah Yohannah Peterson, who often serves in her Greek Orthodox church's bookstore in Anchorage. "A lot of people have an interest in her. We try to keep small icons of her."

Peterson heard the news of Michael's glorification while sitting in an airport. "I just started crying," Peterson said. "I don't have a lot of personal experience with her, but I think that must be changing."

Michael's remains, which lie in her village church cemetery, will now be exhumed as holy relics. Her life story will be included in church calendars, and a rite of glorification—with a special hymn in her honor—will be performed.

According to church accounts, the icy ground in Kwethluk, Alaska, miraculously thawed to allow Michael's burial there on November 10, 1979, and a flock of summer birds appeared during the funeral procession. The new Orthodox calendar names that day as her annual feast day. ❑

CLERGY ABUSE

Chaos erupts over SBC legal filing in Louisville abuse lawsuit

by Bob Smietana
Religion News Service

Abuse survivors, along with some members of the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee and the SBC's abuse reform task force, have denounced a Kentucky court filing by Southern Baptist entities aimed at limiting their liability for sexual abuse claims.

A brief filed earlier in April (but discovered only in October) by lawyers for the Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and SBC publisher Lifeway argues that a Kentucky law that changed the statute of limitations for making civil claims over abuse—and allowing survivors to sue third parties such as churches or police—should not be applied retroactively.

Taking sides against an abuse survivor—in a case that has no SBC ties—was an act of betrayal, said SBC abuse survivors in a statement.

"Neither the SBC, Executive Committee, Lifeway nor SBTS are named in this lawsuit nor involved in this case, yet the SBC proactively chose to side against a survivor and with an abuser and the institution that enabled his abuse, arguing that [she] should not even be given access to the court system—that statute of limitations reform does not extend to institutions," they wrote.

A group of Southern Baptist leaders working on abuse also criticized the brief. "This brief, and the policy arguments made in it, were made without our knowledge and without our approval," the

COURTESY PHOTO / AMAZON

Mike Keahbone (center) leads a prayer with the Southern Baptist Convention's Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force during the 2023 SBC annual meeting in New Orleans.

RNS PHOTO BY EMILY KASK

statement read. "Moreover, they do not represent our values and positions."

It's unclear how the brief came about.

In a statement, the Executive Committee's officers confirmed that no trustees approved the amicus brief. Instead, they said the committee joined the brief on the advice of their attorneys. The statement does not say who approved joining the brief.

At the time the brief was filed, the Executive Committee was led by interim president Willie McLaurin, who resigned in August after admitting he'd faked his resume.

"The filing of this amicus brief, and the response to it, have prompted the current SBC Executive Committee trustees to reevaluate how legal filings will be approved and considered in the future. We will be diligent in addressing those concerns," the officers' statement read.

On October 27, the *Louisville Courier-Journal* reported that SBC lawyers had filed the amicus brief in a case brought by abuse survivor Samantha Killary. Killary was abused for years by her adoptive father, a Louisville police officer, the *Courier-Journal* reported. She has sued two police officers who allegedly knew about the abuse and did nothing to prevent or report it, as well as Louisville's city government, which employed them.

Her suit was initially dismissed but was later reinstated after Kentucky legislators passed legislation that changed the statute of limitations for filing abuse claims. That legislation also allowed survivors to sue third parties, "such as police, government units or religious organizations that violated their duties to children," according to the *Courier-Journal*.

A number of states, including New York and Maryland, have lifted or amended statutes of limitations for filing civil lawsuits in cases of abuse. That has led some Catholic dioceses to declare bankruptcy in the face of abuse lawsuits.

The brief filed by lawyers for the Executive Committee, SBTS, and Lifeway argues that the Kentucky law should not apply retroactively to third parties. While those entities have no ties to the Killary case, they are being sued in a different case of abuse.

For decades, leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention have sought to protect the nation's largest Protestant denomination from any liability for sexual misconduct at local churches.

That legal strategy led SBC leaders to downplay the scope of abuse in the denomination, to treat abuse survivors as their enemies, and to stonewall attempts to address abuse on a national level for years. While the denomination's annual meetings have apologized

In brief

Leaders of the major Christian denominations in Jerusalem have called on churches to refrain from any "unnecessarily festive" Christmas activities this year in solidarity with the victims of the war between Israel and Hamas. Churches are urged instead to hold sober celebrations and to focus on prayer and religious ritual. Normally, Jerusalem's Christian Quarter draws 150,000 pilgrims for its Advent and Christmas celebrations, which include decorations, parades, bazaars, and street concerts.

—Religion News Service

A new filing in a lawsuit against the founder of an anti–sex trafficking organization alleges that M. Russell Ballard—head of the second-highest leadership body of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints until his death on November 12—provided tithing records in order to help the group target potential large donors. In a statement, the LDS Church denied the allegation. Seven plaintiffs are suing Tim Ballard (no relation to Russell), founder of the Utah-based Operation Underground Railroad, for sexual misconduct and assault.

—*Salt Lake Tribune*

Amnesty International has issued a critique of UNESCO's World Heritage program for failing to challenge the Cambodian government's practice of mass evictions around the Angkor Wat temple complex. In a November 14 report, Amnesty International said that by ignoring the evictions of 10,000 families with little or no compensation, the UN was failing in its obligation to promote the human right to housing. Furthermore, the report continued, UNESCO has a particular responsibility to intervene because the Cambodian government was using Angkor Wat's designation as a World Heritage site to justify the evictions.

—Associated Press

Abuse survivors (from left) Debbie Vasquez, Jules Woodson, and Tiffany Thigpen turn to watch as delegates vote on a resolution supporting sexual abuse victims during the 2022 SBC annual meeting in Anaheim, California.

for the past behavior of leaders, the SBC has struggled to move forward with reforms while dealing with its legal challenges.

In their statement responding to the brief, members of the SBC's Executive Committee acknowledged survivors' reactions but said the brief did address important legal issues.

"The statutory and constitutional due process concerns explained in the brief do not negate empathy for survivors of sexual abuse nor the reform efforts that are underway," they said. ❑

HISTORY

New UK museum seeks to tell stories of faith, help local community

by Kristen Thomason
Baptist News Global

Spanning more than 6,000 years, from Neolithic stone circles to the influx of immigrants from across the Commonwealth, the history of faith in the United Kingdom is a sprawling and complex subject. And now, for the first time, all that story is told under one roof.

The Faith Museum, which opened October 7, is the nation's first museum dedicated to preserving and celebrating the country's diverse expressions of religious faith. Multimillionaire philanthropist Jonathan Ruffer created the museum with a £12.4 million grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and £100 million of his own money.

Ruffer credits his own faith for the founding of the museum. He said he was in Wales on an eight-day silent retreat organized by the Jesuits when he felt God calling him to do more for those in need.

Originally from northeast England, Ruffer has long sought ways to make a difference in an area of the country abandoned by the industries that once supported it. While economically impoverished, the town of Bishop Auckland is rich in ecclesiastical history.

In 2013, Ruffer bought Auckland Castle from the Church of England for £11 million. The new Faith Museum, built as an extension of the castle's 14th-century Scottish wing, is the final major piece of the multifaceted Auckland Project, which aims to transform Bishop Auckland into a cultural tourist destination.

A report by Ernst and Young estimates that the project will create 420 jobs in Bishop Auckland and grow the town's economy by £20 million a year. In addition to tourist attractions, the Auckland Project also provides people in the community with educational opportunities and apprenticeships.

The museum's senior curator, Amina Wright, said the first challenge was figuring out how to display something as intangible as faith.

"You can't put faith in a museum, but you can show what it does," she said.

To fill the fledgling museum, Wright borrowed from public and private collections across the UK. Of the 300 objects on display, 60 percent are on loan from institutions like the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum. The items give guests a window into the lives and beliefs of those who once owned them.

"Each one of these amazing objects is a sign of something bigger," Wright said.

Visitors begin their journey on the basement level of the museum among artifacts of the Neolithic Britons, including the Gainford Stone, with its distinct cup and ring rock art. They then make their way upward and forward in time, passing objects belonging to the Celts, Romans, Vikings, medieval monks, Protestants, and dissenters.

One of the stars in the museum's collection is the third-century Binchester Ring, found in 2014

RNS PHOTO BY JUSTIN L. STEWART

A third-century ring, among the earliest evidence of Christianity in Britain, is on display at the Faith Museum.

Auckland Castle, home of the new Faith Museum in Bishop Auckland, in England

on the site of the nearby Roman fort Vinovium. Its carnelian stone, engraved with an anchor and two fish, is among the earliest evidence of Christianity in Britain.

Elsewhere in the museum is a medal from 1521 commemorating King Henry VIII as "Defender of the Faith," a title given to him by Pope Leo X.

Ruffer and the Faith Museum are currently raising money to purchase another Henry VIII artifact, the tapestry "Saint Paul Directing the Burning of the Heathen Books." Commissioned by Henry when he declared himself supreme head of the Church of England, the tapestry is currently in the possession of the Spanish government. Ruffer called the tapestry the "birth certificate of the Church of England," and if obtained, it may hang near William Tyndale's 1536 English translation of the New Testament.

Also at the museum is a wooden pulpit from 1760 once used by John Wesley, a songbook from Billy Graham's London crusade, and an audio recording of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech accepting an honorary degree from Newcastle University.

While Christianity has been the dominant religion in the history of the United Kingdom, the Faith Museum is intentional about displaying objects from a variety of faith traditions in its galleries.

The Ashmolean Museum in Oxford has loaned the Faith Museum the 13th-century Bodleian Bowl, a rare artifact from England's medieval Jewish population. King Edward I expelled the Jews in 1290, and

RING: COURTESY OF DURHAM UNIVERSITY | CASTLE: COURTESY OF THE AUCKLAND PROJECT | JACOBS-STRAIN: COURTESY OF AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES USA

CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Gina Jacobs-Strain to lead American Baptist Churches USA

by Fiona André
Religion News Service

On November 4, Gina Jacobs-Strain was appointed general secretary of the American Baptist Churches USA. According to James Wolf, the denomination's president, a search committee unanimously selected Jacobs-Strain after an 18-month-long process.

Jacobs-Strain comes to ABCUSA from American Baptist Women's Ministries, where she was executive director. She previously served in transitional and interim pastor roles for churches in New Jersey and was the associate regional pastor for the denomination's Women in Ministry program.

Among the numerous challenges that await Jacob-Strain in her new position are leading the denomination's ecumenical work and coordinating the Burma Refugee Commission, a joint effort by different Baptist organizations to advocate for Myanmar refugees' rights.

Jacobs-Strain will begin her two-year tenure in February. ❑

Art and artifacts in an exhibit hall in the new Faith Museum

this bowl is "one of the few Jewish objects to have survived," said Clare Baron, the Faith Museum's head of exhibitions.

The Faith Museum also has on display the prayer beads of Rowland Allanson-Winn, who in 1913 converted to Islam and established the British Muslim Society. A model of the Hindu deity Shiva and a Punjab helmet emblazoned with the symbols of three religions also are housed at the museum.

As visitors reach the top floor of the museum, they enter the final gallery, which examines the topic of faith in Britain today. Ten artists have been asked to respond to the questions most people ponder when engaging faith: Am I alone? How do I live? Where do I belong?

Museum curators hope the artwork will help visitors to reflect on these questions as well. They have refrained from providing detailed explanations of the pieces so that viewers might interpret the art for themselves.

"Faith is an essential elemental force," Ruffer said. "We have no sense of proselytizing. This is everyone's story. We are as broad as humanity." He hopes the museum will help those he calls the "faith hesitant" to engage faith, and he seeks to challenge visitors who are more settled in their beliefs.

Most importantly, Ruffer is looking to put his faith into action by transforming the lives of those left behind by Brexit and Britain's changing economy.

"This is a journey, and we still don't know where we're headed. What we do know is that we want to be able to partner with everybody in town and in every way we can help." ❑

The Bodleian Bowl, on loan from the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, is a rare artifact from England's medieval Jewish population.

EXHIBIT: COURTESY OF THE FAITH MUSEUM | BOWL: COURTESY OF THE ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Why Black women are rising to lead top theology schools

by Rebekah Barber
Religion News Service

At Mount Holyoke College, Danielle R. Holley was recently appointed president. At Boston University, Melissa Gilliam was recently appointed president. At Harvard, the oldest institution for higher learning in the United States, Claudine Gay was recently inaugurated as president. Each is the first Black person to lead her institution. Gilliam is also BU's first female president.

Fewer than 5 percent of PhDs in the United States are awarded to Black women, according to a National Science Foundation survey, and institutions of higher learning face a dearth of representation of Black women in leadership positions. But slowly, Black women are stepping into positions of power—and nowhere has the trend become more evident than at divinity schools.

Perhaps nobody has a better perspective on the movement than Yolanda Pierce, a specialist in womanist theology (and a CENTURY columnist). Dean of Howard University School of Divinity since 2017, last year Pierce was appointed to succeed Emilie Townes—who herself broke the color barrier—as the dean of the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University.

"I'm excited—not just about me, but because there are so many things happening," Pierce said.

Though she often says she was

Yolanda Pierce

Emilie Townes

Keri Day

profoundly shaped by her grandparents, people of deep faith who raised her in the church, Pierce said she never dreamed as a young person of becoming a theologian. But at Princeton, where she enrolled at age 16, she encountered Cornel West and his introduction to African American studies class, along with Albert Raboteau, who taught her African American history.

Both caused her to think more deeply about the study of religion. Her discovery of womanist theology at Cornell University, where she earned her doctorate, bent her scholarship toward not only women but anyone who approaches scripture and faith from the margins.

The same concerns attracted Pierce to Vanderbilt. For more than 100 years, the university's divinity school has been known as the School of the Prophets. Notable alumni include Gardner C. Taylor, a prominent civil rights leader and mentor to Martin Luther King Jr., and James Lawson, who sued the divinity school after he was expelled for organizing sit-ins to protest segregation. Lawson now has an institute at the school named in his honor.

That commonality makes Pierce particularly well equipped to lead the institution, said Keri Day, a Vanderbilt PhD who recently became the first Black woman to be named a full professor at Princeton Theological Seminary and who counts Pierce as a mentor.

Day sees the rise of Pierce, and of Black female divinity school deans in general, as part of a wider movement in academia to acknowledge the racism and violence of their histories by raising up the voices of Black women where they once blocked them.

The appointment of women like Pierce and Marla Frederick at Harvard Divinity School allow for "the possibility of beginning the hard work of deconstructing the forms of anti-Blackness and whiteness," Day said.

Pierce is conscious that battling forces such as racism, sexism, and patriarchy takes an emotional and physical toll. In September, two Black women university presidents, JoAnne A. Epps of Temple University, age 72, and Orinthia T. Montague of Tennessee's four-campus Volunteer State Community College, age 56, both died unexpectedly.

While theology can seem an abstract pursuit, for Pierce and her counterparts its concerns feel tangible and urgent. "The only way to think about doing this work is that there are human beings on the other side of it," Pierce said. "There are life and death issues on the other side of it.

"I think womanist theology is very clear about that, in terms of its praxis," she added. "But that is what gets me up every single day. Someone needs this work. Someone's life will be changed and transformed because of this work." ❑

Vanderbilt Divinity School

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January 6
Epiphany of the Lord

Matthew 2:1–12

It was a small house. In a small town.
It was miles away from the manger.
It was a good life. In a safe home.
Light-years from the danger.

A MUSICIAN FRIEND AND I have collaborated on a few original hymns in the past, and now we are writing a ten-song Christmas cantata, telling the story of Jesus' birth.

Our song "Open the Door" tells of Mary's welcome of the wise strangers at her door. As we imagine it, she greets her guests as though she has been expecting them, flinging the door open to them and, ultimately, to the whole world.

I can imagine that small house in a small town. I grew up in such a place, on a windswept northern Iowa farm. We were the descendants of German immigrants, tall and broad shouldered, fair skinned and plainspoken, our roots sunk deep in that fertile soil.

In 1975, Iowa was the first state to settle refugees from Southeast Asia, at the close of the Vietnam War. My small town was among the communities that welcomed them, gathering warm clothing and sturdy furniture for the small rental house in which they would live. Though I was too young to be privy to the decision-making, I can imagine my elders in the church and community opening their hearts to these strangers in need. Did my immigrant ancestors remember that they had also once been strangers from a distant land?

The family we resettled—three adults and five children—arrived midway through the school year. They didn't speak English. They didn't eat Jell-O. They had never seen winter or ridden a school bus. I cannot imagine how foreign we were to them, how lonely they must have been, how frightened of us and our ways. We must have seemed to be pale giants. And as welcoming as we imagined we were, our welcome was not enough to keep them. Within the year they had moved to Minneapolis, nearer to others who spoke their language, who looked and ate and lived like them.

Some of the locals were deeply insulted by this perceived snub. After all, my small town had opened its arms and hearts to these strangers from a distant land. My small town had imagined the family would put down roots, as our ancestors had. But it was not to be. The family we welcomed stayed only for a time; we were but a stop on a much longer road to a new home for them.

Our song continues:

But then the kings came, asking for another.
And when the kings came, they stirred a loving mother.
She had been waiting for this moment since the day that he'd been born.
She had known that it would happen since the star shone that morn.

The wise ones we meet in Matthew's Gospel would have passed through many small towns in pursuit of the star, as out of place in ancient Israel as Vietnamese immigrants were in Iowa. Mary does not hesitate to invite them into her home, to introduce them to her son, to receive their well-intentioned but wildly inappropriate gifts. Because, as we imagine it in song, she knew they would come. Maybe not these particular strangers, but she knew that the world would come to meet her son.

And she knew that she would welcome them in his name. That this child would be light to the nations. That in opening her door to the traveling strangers, she is opening her door to the world.

Mary also knows that they will not, cannot stay. Their departure is not an affront. It is a necessary part of the story. They will carry news of Christ the king to their own people, in their own language, in their own way. Expanding the love of God in Christ to places of which Mary cannot even dream.

As I write, our new cantata has been sung only in rehearsal. But when I close my eyes, I can imagine opening night. It will be a cold, dark, probably snowless Chicago night. The sanctuary will be dim and warm. Our children's fluty voices will rise with whispering strings as together we sing of the impact of Jesus' birth on the world, on our lives. We will sing of Mary's smiling face as she opens her door to the world.

And not far from us, migrants from Venezuela, bused to our city from our country's southern border, will be settling for the night in converted hotel rooms, police station lobbies, and tent cities in public parks. They are tired and terrified and far from home. Strangers to us and we to them.

In welcoming the wise ones into her home, Mary opens the door to the whole world. We are invited to do the same: to welcome the stranger to our country, our congregations, and our homes. Sometimes they stay; sometimes they continue on. Always, if Mary has her way, they will be welcome at our door.

JOANN A. POST *is a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and author of* Songs in My Head: A Cancer Spiritual.

January 7
Baptism of the Lord

Mark 1:4–11

It was a cold day on the river—January in the Galilee. I was with fellow pilgrims from the United States, traversing the Holy Land with hearts open and mouths agape. We walked where Jesus walked. We smelled the salty sea air he smelled. We ate food he might have eaten. And on that brisk, biting day, we stood on the banks of the river in which Jesus was baptized.

I had hoped we might wade in the river, but it would have been unwise to do so that day. The riverbank was slick with reeds and rushes. The water was dark and cold. I was not willing to risk hypothermia for a photo opportunity. But at the very least, I wanted to touch the water.

In true American consumer fashion, I also wanted to obtain the water. I wasn't interested in the prepackaged bottled Jordan River water available everywhere from street vendors; I wanted the real thing. Creeping carefully down the bank, I knelt at the river's edge with a small bottle I had brought along specifically for this purpose and scooped up a scant cupful of this veritable holy water.

As if he were working on an assembly line, John dips and raises, dips and raises.

Here's what I was imagining: the tap water in the baptism font in my congregation back home mingled with holy water from the Jordan. I was imagining the moving sermons I would preach, the clever analogies I would draw, the tears on the faces of those doused with the same water in which Jesus was plunged. Though I am not ordinarily a seeker of talismans and amulets, Jordan River water held a fascination for me. And in that moment, on the slippery bank of the river, I held magic in a bottle.

When John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan, Jesus is but one of many. Remember, people from the whole Judean countryside are coming to the river to be baptized by John. In our imaginations, as Jesus emerges from the water, a spotlight cracks through the sky and the world grows dark. As though onstage, Jesus gazes heavenward to see a ragged sky and a rocketing dove, to hear a voice that sounds like either James Earl Jones or Judi Dench, depending on your idea of what an authoritative voice sounds like.

But there is no spotlight. There is no stage. Jesus is dipped under the water by John's strong hands and then raised to his feet. Next! As though working an assembly line, John dips and raises, dips and raises. For hours. There is nothing magic about it. Just a long line of sinners in search of redemption in the muddy waters of the Jordan.

A pastoral colleague who ministers in Amman, Jordan, describes the reality of baptizing in the Jordan River. On more than one occasion, as he and his congregation stand in the river baptizing, random tourists shout at them from the shore: "Baptize me! Baptize me!" On a whim, these thrill seekers beg to be dunked in the river. But only after they've got cameras at the ready. My colleague is regarded as a magician, pulling a rabbit out of a river.

Meanwhile, I flew all the way home from the Middle East with a vial of water from the Jordan in my carry-on bag. I stored it in a place of honor in my office, eager to uncork it for the next baptism. Several months passed. And by the time I went to mingle the local waters of the Mississippi with the exotic waters of the Jordan, my vial of holy water had turned to a vial of vile. Murky. Smelly. The bottom of the jar coated in sediment and the top in slime. I tossed it out, jar and all.

I should have known. The Jordan is a shallow, silt-filled river that carries agricultural runoff, sewage, and political unrest downstream. It's too shallow to boat on and too polluted to swim in. The river marks a demilitarized zone between Israel and Jordan, its shores studded with armed snipers. The waters of the Jordan are diverted away from the Palestinian territories, contributing to one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. Water is always in short supply in that part of the world: the country that "owns" the Jordan for both irrigation and consumption is the winner.

There is—and was—nothing magic about baptizing in the Jordan. So, what is it, exactly, that we celebrate on Baptism of the Lord Sunday?

The sinless Son of God submits to an anonymous baptism in a local river at the hands of a local preacher. And then he goes back to work. There's no magic. Baptism in water—local or otherwise—is but one of many beginnings for us. Named and claimed, we emerge from the water with a new identity and a new purpose. Both in being baptized and in daily remembering our baptisms, we dip and rise, dip and rise. We are immersed in the often murky reality of faithful life in God's world. —*JAP*

January 14
Second Sunday after the Epiphany

John 1:43–51

WHEN THE SHERIFF'S DEPUTIES raid the sleazy carnival act, it looks like there's no way for the performers to get out of trouble. But the show's bogus mind reader and medium steps up to the lawman and gives him a demonstration of the genuineness of his powers. His mother—Mary, was it?—wants him to know she's not ashamed that he didn't see any fighting in the war. Astonished, the converted skeptic lets the show leave town in peace. The other performers crowd around the mind reader, wanting to know how he did it. He picked up a few details from the man's dress and gait, and he took a guess that Mary would be a popular name in the area.

That's how extrasensory perception is handled in the film noir classic *Nightmare Alley* (and its 2021 remake). Even the most hardheaded, upstanding citizen is on some level a mark, wanting to hear something he doesn't trust himself to know yet willing to believe anyone who says it to him in the right voice. You might think you're going to the show to figure out the trick, but what you want, deep down, is to believe. Even the amoral and cynical mind reader himself wants to believe in someone (and when he does . . . well, you'll have to watch the movie to see how it works out for him).

In this week's gospel passage, Jesus speaks a word of insight about Nathanael that is, on the surface, indistinguishable from a sideshow grift like the ones played in *Nightmare Alley*. He identifies Nathanael as an Israelite without any deceit after nothing more than a middle-distance glance of him under a fig tree, and Nathanael responds by calling him Son of God and king of Israel. I've never quite known what to make of this response by Nathanael. Is it sarcastic? Is it simply credulous? Or is it neither but rather an expression of Nathanael's deep need to be identified by someone, anyone, as an honest man?

Sitting there on the page, this story can seem strange or overdrawn. But it has an unavoidable poignancy all the same. While our own age may appear to us to be disenchanted compared to the ancient Mediterranean world, and while our standards of knowledge may appear to us to be more exacting than theirs, I don't think this essential desire to believe certain kinds of messages—and certain kinds of messengers—has ever gone away. Schools of occult knowledge, from conspiracy theories to astrology, are as popular as ever. Immense prestige can flow to people who predict a short-term trend, unlock the supposed secret causes of personal or communal history, or salve our psychic wounds with external affirmation. Every bid for our attention and agreement has at least a shade of the carnival act. And lurking in the heart of almost all of us is a sucker waiting to be played.

The difference between prophetic insight, as Jesus proclaims it to Nathanael, and a confidence game is not just that Jesus is honest in his motives or that he is drawing on divine knowledge rather than extrapolating from clues. It's a question of the stakes. The Jesus of John's Gospel is equipped to be the world's greatest and most celebrated mountebank or, less cynically, a healer of profound insight and sensitivity. But he doesn't settle for knowledge. You will see much greater things than this flash of insight, he tells Nathanael. You will see heaven open and the angels ascending and descending upon the Son of man. Falling for a con game and experiencing true faith may feel the same, but their object differs.

Nathanael may leap because he has been known or affirmed, or just because he needs something better to do than sitting around under a fig tree. (In the online slang of the last decade, this would be discipleship "for the lulz.") But Jesus ends up promising him that he will land somewhere very different than he may imagine, far outside the guileless self Jesus has identified.

And at this point, too, Jesus' message differs from the carnival hustle: having set the hook, he gives his follower a reason and an opportunity to immediately wriggle off of it. Beholding the promised eschatological Son of man and an army of angels may be a fascinating prospect, but it is also a frightening one. One may have compelling reasons to say, "Thanks, but no thanks." By whatever route it takes, the grift must deliver us to a place of psychological safety. The call of Jesus, he seems to indicate here, offers no such promise. The hoodwinked sheriff goes home with a warm feeling. The disciple, for his own reasons and heaven's, joins the circus.

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January 21
Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Mark 1:14–20

In history as in fiction, the event of a succession in leadership is a reliable moment of high drama. Sometimes a leader fails to plan for it (Lenin wrote some warnings about Stalin but left the dictatorship he invented open to Stalin's maneuverings), sometimes a leader makes plans but the survivors ignore them (Edward VI named Lady Jane Grey as his heir, but she ended up losing the crown and her head to her cousin Mary), and sometimes death catches the old boss too soon (Logan Roy, dithering among his inadequate offspring in *Succession*). Often the leader's followers have to make the best plans they can on their own.

I recall a professor telling us that when Luther was in hiding in Wartburg and his friends assumed he was captured or killed, some asked when Erasmus would step up to take on the mantle of leading the reform movement. All of a sudden, a center of energy and legitimacy is gone, and everyone close to it is immediately subject to danger and quick shifts in direction. It's a time of new possibilities, both fearful and exciting.

The gospels don't depict John as much of an organization builder.

While John the Baptist appears in all four gospels, only in Mark and Matthew is his arrest noted as the catalyst for Jesus' public ministry. And it's only in Mark that Jesus is not specifically singled out by John himself as the one who was to come after him. It's not clear that anyone besides Jesus sees the heavens opened and hears the voice from above at his baptism. So when Mark records that Jesus' ministry begins after John is arrested, there is no indication that this amounts to the execution of an established succession plan. The base of support for John's political-religious revival movement is, in that moment, like sheep without a shepherd.

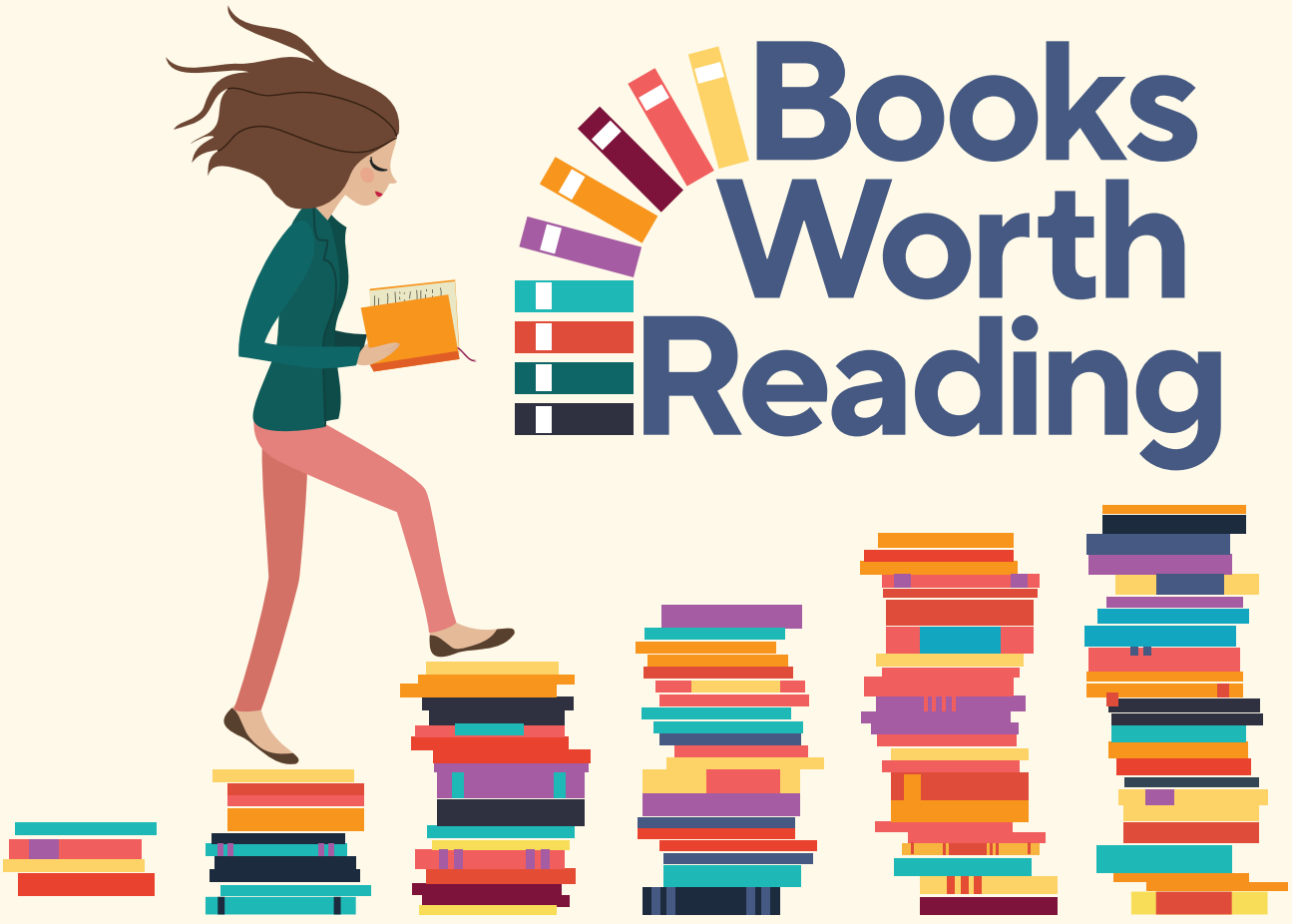
The gospels don't depict John as much of an organization builder. This distinguishes him from the likes of Lenin, Edward VI, and Logan Roy. When a leader of profound individual charisma departs the scene, one major risk is that their movement will simply dissipate or fragment into squabbling factions. And it is not hard to imagine that the minimally portrayed Jesus of Mark's Gospel might, at first, seem like something other than a natural heir to John's movement, such as it is. We get no indication that he appears in the deliberately archaic costume of camel's hair. Is this really the person we should be following? Is this really the time for whatever it is that John is foretelling? We might well imagine that those first disciples he calls have been led by John's prophetic activity to expect something, that they are primed to follow. But it's hard to imagine anyone, except perhaps Jesus himself, is especially confident that this is the particular path to follow.

It became customary in Christian iconography to show John pointing to Jesus, as if his role were confined to announcing a person and not calling the masses to a messianic age. But in Mark's Gospel, when Jesus starts proclaiming that the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near, he is not stepping into an open space John has humbly left for him. He is not following John's warm-up act. He's picking up the mantle of a fallen hero and carrying it forward in a new way. It's not part of anyone's plan but God's.

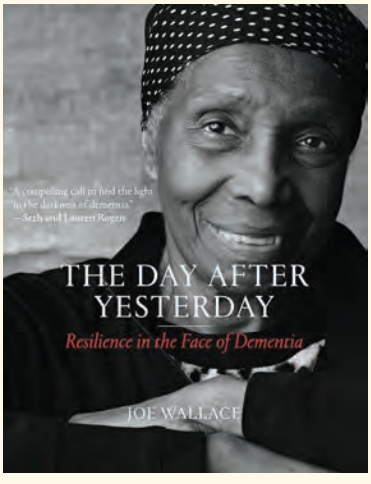
Perhaps this makes the launching of the Galilean ministry and the response of Simon, Andrew, James, and John all the more moving and poignant. Perhaps they have been waiting not for a promised messenger but for a continuation of a thrilling message. They don't need John's stamp of approval on the next guy; they need hope that the prophetic word and mission hasn't failed.

Of course, it will all go in directions none of them, at this point, can anticipate. Whatever John has taught the people to hope and to work for will only be ambiguously fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus and its ongoing aftermath. Jesus' own followers will have to discern a truly shocking and scandalous succession plan in hindsight, as they claim that he has been killed and yet raised from the dead and has entrusted his disciples not to a single charismatic figure but to their mutual wisdom and the care of the Holy Spirit. Before long, that community of disciples will be as riven and rivalrous as the children of any mogul and, later on, as violently conflicted as any civil state.

But for now, at the beginning, there is only the prophetic silence into which Jesus speaks. If the kingdom of God, as Jesus says, has come near, it is not as the unfolding of a plan but as the sudden interruption of that fretful silence. —*BJD*



CHRISTIAN CENTURY books editor Elizabeth Palmer sorts through her stacks



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January 28
Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Mark 1:21–28

A BILLBOARD ON MY COMMUTE seeks to draw drivers to a big downtown church by promoting three apparently prominent biblical teaching authorities. I recognize only one of them, from his interventions in national politics, but the others look pretty similar: male, graying, in conservative suits. The names and faces are, I imagine, intended to inspire confidence in the seriousness and sobriety of the teaching available at this church. But I confess that when I drive by, my reaction is unfair and uncharitable. None of them, I think to myself, would recognize God if God bit him on the butt.

I have no grounds for this reaction, of course. The same could just as easily be said of me, though my confidence game gear looks different (sober chasubles over an alb that has usually been laundered in the last quarter). For all I know, it would be true. My job is different from theirs, but it's a job all the same, and it is subject to its own Spirit-stifling routinization.

All those years in scribe school count for nothing when one rustic with charisma comes along!

This is why I have come to take a rather gentler view of the scribes than the gospel accounts give us. Try as I might, I can't imagine them as a nefarious, consciously self-seeking cohort of bad-faith actors. To the extent that they are analogous to lawyers or Christian clergy, I obviously can't deny the possibility of true venality—I live in Dallas, after all, America's longtime capital of religious hucksterism. But I always imagine someone diligently plugging away at a set of texts and duties that he (presumably they were all "he") had been handed and making the best of it.

So when the synagogue at Capernaum expresses astonishment that Jesus teaches with authority and "not as the scribes," I feel a certain secondhand humiliation. All those years in scribe school just count for nothing when one rustic with charisma comes along! One need not stretch the text too far to imagine the reaction, just off the page, of those administrators and custodians of the people's legal and prophetic tradition who are just abandoned in an instant without a thought for credentials, preparation, or any of the normal markers of "one having authority." From their point of view, this event might have been evidence of the fickleness of the crowd and their desire to be told things that exceed the bounds of the text and tradition. How many diligent, faithful, gray-faced clergy through the ages must have felt that way when a flashy, mysterious newcomer stole their thunder?

If the story ended at verse 22, we would have an interesting question about authority on our hands, one with by no means welcome implications for churches today. In what does the perceived authority of Jesus inhere? He doesn't come with a diploma or the commendation of a teacher. It's hard to imagine him in vestments or professional garb, with a learned and competent but aesthetically restrained deck of slides to aid the listener. No billboards or websites trumpet the appearance of this sought-after guest speaker.

Is there something in his delivery? The message itself? I say, and believe, that Jesus appears to us just as we need him to. But to his contemporaries and fellow countrymen, he must have appeared in a very specific guise, some scuffed texture to which the glue of the Spirit could have adhered.

But that's not where the story ends. The authoritative teaching of Jesus, baffling as it must have been to the scribes, provokes a demon in the crowd. "I know who you are, the Holy One of God," it says, before Jesus casts it out. Mark's Gospel famously foregrounds the confessions of the demons; in a way, they speak more truly of Jesus than either his followers or adversaries.

That, however, is an insight for the reader or hearer secondhand. Inside the story, this is not a rhetorical choice but a fascinating demonstration. It is one thing to believe the testimony of the trappings, the demeanor, or the charisma of the teacher. It's no great shock, after all, when someone willing to be persuaded is, in fact, persuaded. But the testimony of a foe is different.

The assent of demons is too high a bar for most of us to clear in our scribal ministry. But I do wonder how often we encounter the authority of the unlikely confession. Churches today can seem to be more intent on scrambling for the persuadable worshiper, perhaps disengaged or disenchanted with their last church but curious enough to be won over by a new one, than reaching the truly non-believing. That's what those billboard faces are doing, and that's what I'm doing, too: being the most plausible scribes we can be. But the most dramatic and authoritative responses are exactly the ones we aren't looking for. For those, the most well-trained and sensitive scribe can be no more than a medium or bystander for words and power that come from somewhere else entirely. —*BJD*

Voices

"At some point, history, for Romero, went from an abstract concept to a living force."

—Alejandra Oliva, *page 32*

Columnists in this issue

Julian DeShazier on how committees can hamper the church's work

Alejandra Oliva seeks answers from Óscar Romero

Philip Jenkins pokes some holes in the "lost gospels" mythology

Melissa Florer-Bixler learns to see nature from Black writers

Isaac S. Villegas wonders if he should keep reading Yoder

Yolanda Pierce has a good laugh with friends

THE CENTURY COLUMNISTS PORTRAITS BY AGATA NOWICKA

Brian Bantum • Julian DeShazier • Melissa Florer-Bixler • Philip Jenkins
Rachel Mann • Heidi Neumark • Alejandra Oliva • Yolanda Pierce
Debie Thomas • Jonathan Tran • Isaac S. Villegas • Samuel Wells

The 80/20 rule is a problem for churches

So why do so many of them embrace it as a solution?

by Julian DeShazier

Julian DeShazier is senior minister of University Church in Chicago. He is also an Emmy-winning hip-hop artist who performs under the name J.Kwest.

When I started pastoring, at the ripe old age of 27, a more seasoned pastor took me to lunch and gave me some advice. Most of it was really useful. But at the end he said something I'm guessing a lot of readers have heard before. "And one more thing," he said, "find your leaders. You've heard of the 80/20 rule, right? Only about 20 percent of the people are going to do more than just come to worship. They do everything for the other 80 percent, so find them and you'll be fine."

It's not terrible advice. It certainly resonates with what we see happening around us. A vital few do the work for the many. And so it follows that if you concentrate on the few, it will buoy the many. Consciously or not, we faith leaders often abide by this: the members who do the work—or give more money—are considered "more vital" than everyone else. So we cultivate them, to the extent that the 80 percent may feel totally disconnected. We follow the logic of this well-known but widely misunderstood 80/20 rule.

First, the origins. In 1895, an Italian economist named Vilfredo Pareto recognized that 80 percent of the land was owned by 20 percent of the people. This led other social scientists to notice similar patterns across society, and the Pareto principle, or 80/20 rule, was born. In his recognition of the "vital few" and the "trivial many," however, it's important to recognize that Pareto was describing a problem, not a solution.

In church practice, this formula presents a few problems. First, and most important: this way of thinking and organizing isn't the gospel! Jesus didn't take 2.4 of his 12 disciples and say, "OK, let's meet over here and figure out what we're gonna do." He invited them all to his ministry. A church where 20 percent of the people are doing all the work may be typical, but it does not reflect the kind of congregation described in Acts 2. The early church was far more communal, and everyone was expected to pitch in as they could. Back then, you might even have gotten called out if all you did was show up on Sunday. Those folks in the Bible are tough!

We're nicer now, but there's a second problem with this practice: it burns people out. People will serve in a particular role at church for years, and when they stop it's not because they want to do something else or feel called to serve in a different way; it's because they physically can't do it anymore. Their bodies buckle from carrying the weight of the work alone. And though the solution may be to gracefully thank them and go find someone else, this plays into the same cycle of burnout. The 80/20 rule is a problem of theological anthropology and justice.

Then there's a third problem. One person does the work, or a small group takes it on, and it becomes trapped inside this thing called a *committee*. It's not that the concept of committees is terrible; it's good to make sure someone is focused on a particular thing. And it isn't a problem with the word *committee*; you can call it a "task force" or "team" or "working group" or whatever you'd like. The problem is that whatever you call them, if committees are built around the 80/20 rule, then they become containers for the various arms of the church in a way that is limiting rather than empowering.

If you want to do social justice, go over there. Oh, hospitality? That's what this other group does. But if that's what they do, then what does the entire church do? I worry that our typical practice encourages a vital few specialists, while the rest are encouraged to be onlookers. People who say, "I'm glad to be part of a church doing this," instead of, "I'm glad to be helping my church do this."

I experienced this far too often in the early years of my pastorate, so some of my lay

leaders and I decided to try something different. When we started offering sanctuary to an undocumented immigrant facing deportation, there was a question of who would be in charge. And because we didn't have anything like an immigration committee at the time, we fumbled a bit. All of our committees were a bit scrambled at the time—longtime chairs were ready to move on, and groups were struggling to attract new members, even as the church itself was growing—so we found ourselves at a crossroads.

We decided that just this once we'd frame an action not as the work of a few on our behalf but as something the entire church would be helping with. We obviously needed some folks to help coordinate logistics, but they were going to shape the work for the rest of us, not do it all themselves. Because isn't everything the church does part of the church's ministry? Then no matter who organizes it, it should always end up back in front of everyone.

And then we invited the wider community, from outside our congregation, because neither committees nor congregations should be owning God's loving work. We quickly realized that there were scores of people who were happy to help us provide hospitality and love. Very few of them joined the planning team, and almost none joined the church officially, but in those moments this was the church—no one would have disagreed. And on Sundays, we brought updates to the gathered congregation so that everyone could be praying and investing in our collective work in other ways.

The result was that the work was done but also that the people involved felt like leaders rather than like the ones responsible for carrying the project. And when that situation ended, they were ready to do it again. It is life-giving to feel like you're contributing to the whole. It is exhausting to feel like something won't happen without you.

So let's stop being satisfied with the 80/20 rule. We should be thinking 100 percent—everybody in—and shaping our ministries to reflect that. ❑

Caught up in the sweep of history

When I am troubled by the times in which we live, I turn to Óscar Romero.

by Alejandra Oliva

Alejandra Oliva is an immigration advocate and author of Rivermouth: A Chronicle of Language, Faith, and Migration.

We live in horrifying times, times that feel like they demand a response from us. It seems like every week there's something new—an outbreak of violence, a report that puts climate change further and further into apocalyptic territory. These feel like everyday things, at least in part because many of them are ongoing, with no inciting event to pin your concern on. In other words: horror itself feels like business as usual. We feel called to action, but even that feels diffuse and strange. What kind of action? What kind of attention or care could possibly meet this ongoing moment? For an answer, I turn to Archbishop Óscar Romero.

In a November 1977 homily, Romero referred to God as a God of history, a wellspring of time. When he said this, El Salvador was hurtling toward civil war, Romero had been archbishop for less than a year, and his friend Rutilio Grande had been dead at the hands of unknown assassins for six months. You might argue that in those six months, Romero had been swept up into history—living during not *a* time but *this* time, realizing he held not only a responsibility to his fellow Christians but this very specific responsibility, shaped around his historical moment and circumstance. History, for Romero, had gone from an abstract concept to a living force, a force with its finger on his pulse, a force calling his name just as impatiently and in the same voice as God.

They may as well be the same thing. Romero describes history as omnipresent, gathering us all into its sweep, even "the tiniest child, even the nameless campesino who harvests coffee." It doesn't give you a choice about being involved in it; it accounts for every atom. With a God and a history so meticulous, so inescapable, Romero's

response of living into it, embracing its challenges, seems the only way to live in it at all.

It is also an eternal history that arcs into the end of days. Romero speaks of a final, crystallizing moment when the keys of the kingdom will be handed over and history will serve as an "adornment" to God, the coffee harvester and the tiniest child and Romero alike all at once preserved in the amber of time, like prehistoric insects, and freed from its constraints.

However, for all his taking of the long view, he still argues for working on history, for a betterment of time now: "Christianity proves to be better than communism when people work like communists and hope in God like Christians." With this, he pushes back against religion as the "opiate of the masses" and instead argues for a more active, relational kind of Christianity, an eschatology focused on the betterment of the world and not simply its ending.

In another homily, given about a month later during Christmas, Romero speaks of "the horizon of history appearing dark and closed off, as if human realities have made it impossible for God's plans to be accomplished." The question this homily raises is, at least to me, at once one of the most clichéd and the most urgent: How can a just and merciful God be omnipotent and at the same time, allow all of *this*?

I don't know if I agree with Romero's assessment that "suffering is necessary," but I do know that it makes me angry. It feels like insisting on the necessity of suffering turns religion into an opiate after all, asks people to keep their heads down in the face of their own oppression, normalizes what should not be normal. Romero goes on to say that even human error might be enough for God to do God's work, to crack open that darkness on the horizon. He quotes Isaiah: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwell in the land of gloom a light has shone" (9:2). Patience is needed. But still, if the fullness of time, if history, can be measured in human suffering, then any time is too long.

Romero's sense of history seems to mirror his sense of God: it is all-encompassing and something close to eternal. However, it also falls outside of God: he acknowledges that if not history, then at least the future sometimes seems impossible thanks to the interventions of man, that God seems powerless in the arc of history. How to react, then, to living in a history that is at once immersive and temporary? How to account for the specific of the temporal in the face of the eternal?

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The archbishop's sense of history mirrors his sense of God: it is all-encompassing and something close to eternal.

I think the lesson that Romero holds for all of us living in more interesting times than we might have liked is this: to live out the promise of your life as it's been given, to participate fully in this time, to turn that life toward justice or peace or at the very least the lessening of suffering. It's a lesson that feels sometimes a little small, not drastic enough; it feels like the human suffering in the world demands something more heroic of me. It feels like a time of drastic action, in the same way I'm sure El Salvador in 1977 felt.

But Saint Óscar Romero, martyred for his resistance to the arc of the history in which he lived, did not do much outside the realm of his own profession: he spoke the names of the dead, he called for peace in turbulent times, he comforted the poor and dying and oppressed, asked for justice, wrote letters on behalf of those with less power. These are all things a priest might do in any arc of history. It is in his continuing to do that work, all of it, that Romero rises above being any priest and becomes a specific one, called to his time. ❑

Were the lost gospels really lost?

The myth that alternative gospels were suppressed by empire and only recently rediscovered is too good to be true.

by Philip Jenkins

Philip Jenkins teaches at Baylor University. He is author of A Storm of Images: Iconoclasm and Religious Reformation in the Byzantine World.

Around 800, an unknown Irish monastery listed the appropriate liturgical readings for different feast days. For the mass of the circumcision, the text for the day came from the Gospel of James, presented with the words that would have been used to introduce a standard passage from canonical Mark or John. We have no idea where that church found such an out-of-the-way text, or what happened to it. Was the world's last copy burned in a Viking raid?

In itself, such a mysterious story offers no fundamental revision of Christian history. But it does raise a question about a widespread and influential mythology concerning early Christianity, one that shows up every time someone claims to have found a lost ancient gospel. It is familiar to anyone who has read Dan Brown.

The story goes like this. In the earliest Christian centuries, a great many writings about Jesus circulated, and the number of claimed gospels might have run into the hundreds. As the Roman Empire made Christianity the state religion, so the number of acceptable gospels was rigidly pruned back, to our canonical Big Four, and those other embarrassing contenders were progressively suppressed. By the 380s, when imperial regimes decisively moved against the remaining gospels, one treasure trove was famously concealed at Nag Hammadi in Egypt. That hoard was rediscovered in 1945 and made widely available in translation in the 1970s, and only at that point were we at last able to glimpse the brilliantly diverse truths of the earliest Jesus movement. Finally, after 1,500 lost years, the truth was revealed.

From the Gospel of Nicodemus to the Hymn of the Pearl, noncanonical texts about Jesus have circulated for millennia.

It's a classic story—a myth—of concealment and near-miraculous rediscovery, even a kind of resurrection, and if it seems too good to be true, that is just what it is. Most significantly, the great majority of those recently rediscovered texts were written at least a couple of centuries after Jesus' time, and as such, they tell us nothing historically worthwhile about the apostolic age. In virtually every case, the authors took what they said about Jesus from one or more of the four canonical gospels and added their own particular theological bells and whistles.

But there are other problems. As that Irish story reminds us, alternative gospels did not actually vanish as neatly and suddenly as is claimed, nor was there any reason for them to. If the Roman Empire tried to suppress alternative gospels, this writ did not run beyond its frontiers, in the sprawling Persian Empire, or in intervening buffer states. Plenty of other gospels circulated freely in those areas, and for many centuries, and Christian dissidents regularly reimported them into the mainstream Catholic and Orthodox world.

Students of church history may know about heretical movements like the followers of Marcion and Bardaisan, which flourished in the second century. But most would be surprised to read Islamic writers of the 11th century who remarked on the gospels attributed to those ancient heretical leaders, which were still circulating freely across Central Asia and along the Silk Route. Christian numbers were very strong in these regions. This was also the territory of the far-flung Manichaean religion, which carried such esteemed early texts as the Gospel of Thomas wherever its followers traveled and evangelized: fragments appear in oases in China.

Islamic writers also had access to many early stories of Jesus that did not survive elsewhere, and some are evocative. They recall a provocative and mystical prophet who advises, for instance, "If people appoint you as their heads, be like tails" and "Be in the middle, but walk to the side." These actually sound very much like the odd free-floating sayings of Jesus that appear in early Christian Fathers, the logia.

But even in the heart of Orthodox Christian Europe, alternative gospels continued to circulate, and some came close to canonical status.

One of the earliest such works that we can realistically date is the Gospel of James, a protoevangelium or infancy gospel. Probably written in the 140s, it never went out of circulation, and it is the source for the vast majority of legendary tales about the Virgin Mary that through the centuries have formed the subject of tens of thousands of pious pieces of church art. This gospel is a primary influence on what we think we know about Christmas, and it had a powerful influence on the Qur'an.

A little later—from the fifth century?—is the Gospel of Nicodemus, which tells the story of Christ's descent to hell after his crucifixion. That story likewise had a phenomenal impact on a millennium of Christian art, thought, culture, and liturgy. Had you asked an orthodox medieval Christian what were Jesus' most famous words, the answer might well have been "Lift up your heads, O ye gates!" the war cry that he utters before storming hell to rescue the virtuous dead. Although the words are quoted from Psalm 24, the immediate source is the Gospel of Nicodemus.

These are just two examples of a great many alternative works that many churches read freely across Catholic and Orthodox Europe. Scarcely less influential were the very sizable bodies of Acts of various apostles, some of which included visions of Jesus rooted in Gnostic and heretical thought. One precious treasure of second-century Gnostic speculation is the stunningly evocative Hymn of the Pearl, which survives only because it was incorporated into the Acts of the apostle Thomas.

We also need to be very skeptical about claims that all those ancient visions of an alternative Jesus were lost until very modern times—indeed, until the 1970s. In fact, any educated person in 1900 had access to a substantial library of texts and translations that told you all you needed to know about the "Gnostic Jesus," and new finds continued steadily throughout the early 20th century.

Once we admit this, however, we lose the romantic idea of the sudden revelation that burst upon us in our own time. Some myths are just too good to ruin with facts. ❑

Nature is not an escape

To understand this, I had to stop reading John Muir and turn to the nature writing of the Harlem Renaissance.

by Melissa Florer-Bixler

Melissa Florer-Bixler is pastor of Raleigh Mennonite Church in North Carolina and author of How to Have an Enemy *and* Fire by Night.

While crossing the Mississippi River by train as a teenager, Langston Hughes wrote a poem about the longest and most powerful rivers in the world as sources of Black dignity and intimacy. Hughes wrote "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in 1920, a year after the brutal violence of the Red Summer, when White mobs tortured and lynched masses of Black people across the United States. Reading this poem, I cannot forget that these horrors enacted upon Black people often took place by riverbanks. The secluded wilderness was a place where White people were free to kill with impunity.

Encounters with Hughes and other writers have led me to interrogate the place of the sublime in my theology of nature. I absorbed a perspective indebted to naturalists like John Muir, who saw in the pristine splendor of the frontier a chance to escape the chaos and grime of city life. I was drawn to the outdoors as a site of awe and inspiration, and I recognized the threat to these wonders caused by development and human intrusion.

But I also imbibed what Paul Outka calls an "extrahistorical real." The literary scholar argues that going west to the wilderness allowed Muir to disengage from the "trauma of the war, the horrors of slavery, the sharp division between north and south" during the Civil War. Muir ignored the fact that his natural wonders bore the scars of the forced removal and genocide of Indigenous people. In the words of Black poet and nature writer Camille Dungy, "I have never believed John Muir had any interest in me."

As wildfires tear across Maui and the Canadian wilderness, as 100-year storms visit us yearly, as catastrophic flooding wipes away vulnerable coastal communities, I've returned to the nature writings of the Harlem Renaissance and to womanist conceptions of ecology in order to better read the Bible and to find a home for my grief and my hope for our planet's future. I've needed these laments, which trace the complex terrors of greed and race, to ground myself in a world that is coming apart.

The nature writing of the Harlem Renaissance holds together the dualities of environmental terror and homecoming. I thought of this paradox as I stood on the deck of a boat, floating past the levees on the Mississippi. Marvels of engineering, these levees muscle back the waters of the powerful river, providing tenuous and fragile land for human habitation. Throughout the 20th century, the unnatural restraint of levees allowed White business owners to prosper at the expense of Black workers on their farms and in their factories.

This marriage of capital and environmental possession erupted in 1927 when the Mississippi flooded the Yazoo Delta, killing hundreds of people and displacing 640,000 workers—most of them Black—who lived their lives on the riverbank. "When it thunders and lightnin', and the wind begins to blow," wailed Bessie Smith that year in "Backwater Blues," "There's thousands of people, ain't got no place to go." It was the greatest natural disaster in recorded US history.

I can remember feeling a chill of despair reading "Down by the Riverside," Richard Wright's short story of desperation and trauma that unfolds during the Great Mississippi Flood. Mann, a Black worker and father, is desperate to obtain a boat to rescue his family from the floodwaters that are consuming the house around them. When soldiers force him at gunpoint to help reinforce the dangerously bulging levees, he sees a snaking line of Black men loading boats with sandbags from a nearby cement plant. "In front of him," Wright writes, "he could feel the river as though it were a live, cold hand touching his face." Then a siren blares. The levee breaks. "The long lines of men merged into one whirling black mass. Shouts rose in a mighty roar." The river of Black men is the river of the Mississippi, a common fate and a common destruction. Nature's force overwhelms the technologies of the wealthy and destroys the vulnerable in the process.

In an essay about her complex relationship to the outdoors as a Black woman, Evelyn White describes the dueling emotions that accompanied her desire to live in the Northern California woods: "Elation at the prospect of living closer to nature and a sense of absolute doom about what might befall me in the backwoods." Among trees and along rivers she shares a genetic memory with her ancestors—"exposed, vulnerable, and unprotected." It takes time, but White comes to discover that within the trauma of the past are the rivers which also watered her ancestors. She takes a rafting trip and notices "stately rocks, soaring birds, towering trees." She welcomes rapids like "a runaway roller coaster." She

Rivers praise and flee in the scriptures. They are both a source of delight and a threat of destruction.

can hear the voice of Hughes in the sky: "I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins."

The words of these writers are at home with what I know of the natural world from the writers of the Old Testament, people who also experienced creation as both power and terror, hope and deliverance, intertwined with politics and dominion. In Exodus, Egypt is the archetype slaver, a possessor of creatures both human and nonhuman. Egyptian treatment of the enslaved Hebrews echoes back in the nation's treatment of the Nile, the source of Egyptian state power. In Ezekiel we learn the extent of the unnamed Pharaoh's hubris when he announces that he is the Nile's creator. "My Nile is my own, I made it for myself," Pharaoh boasts. "Who owns a river? Who claims the waters as their own handiwork?" Ezekiel blasts in return.

I sense God's presence in our natural world when I read a description of the Nile as a churning omen of death to the haughty Egyptians. In the scriptures rivers praise and flee. They are both a source of delight and a threat of destruction. Black writers join the Bible in pointing us to nature's power not as an escape to the sublime, removing us from the hardness of concrete and pavement, but as a site of human terror and a source of life. ❑

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Harmful people with helpful ideas

I still read Luther, Calvin, and de Beauvoir. But John Howard Yoder's sexual abuse has made me rethink my mindset.

by Isaac S. Villegas

Isaac S. Villegas is an ordained minister in Mennonite Church USA and a PhD student in religion at Duke University.

In a scene early in Todd Field's 2022 film *Tár*, eminent composer Lydia Tár (Cate Blanchett) is teaching a master class at Juilliard. After extolling the compositions of J. S. Bach, Tár provokes Max, a nervous student, to respond with their musical inspirations. "I'm not really into Bach," Max answers. She prods Max with smug condescension, insisting that they must say something more to defend what she considers to be an absurd opinion. "I'd say Bach's misogynistic life makes it kind of impossible for me to take his music seriously," Max replies. "Didn't he sire like 20 kids?"

That someone would link Bach's sexual life to his brilliant work offends Tár, who snaps back at Max in front of the class: "I'm unclear as to what his prodigious skills in the marital bed have to do with B minor."

In her review of the film for the *New York Review of Books*, Zadie Smith highlights this back-and-forth between Tár and Max as representative of our current debates about the connections between a person's life and work, between personal ethics and creative achievement. "Can an A-minor chord be misogynistic?" Smith asks. She lets her question linger unanswered. Probably because there are no answers—no schema for untangling the threads of influence in a work of art, no solvent to dissolve the contradictions that compose a person's life.

What seems clear is that we, according to our cultural mores, assume that an artist's or a writer's life is present—even if the markings are faint—in their work. The ethical or unethical aspects of their lives press into what they produce. Their identities and choices are somehow legible to us on the page or canvas. These kinds of ad hominem associations have become culturally relevant to our appreciation, enjoyment, and respect. This is in stark opposition to the 20th-century critical school that emphasized the "death of the author," maintaining that knowledge of an author's life and intention was irrelevant to the meaning of a text.

The ideas of people who've enacted harm populate my thinking, my theologizing. Does it matter?

I don't think a particular chord can be misogynistic, but that might have more to do with my lack of musical sophistication than anything else. I'd be at a loss if, while listening to a piece of music, I was asked to pick out the indicted chord. But I do share something of Max's concerns when I think about my indebtedness to theologies and philosophies that come from the lives of people who've hurt others. I still read Martin Luther, despite his vile attacks on Judaism and his defense of killing Anabaptists. I still think with John Calvin, despite his active involvement in the execution of Michael Servetus. I'm troubled by the revelations of Simone de Beauvoir's sexually abusive relationships with students, but I can't imagine my own development as a feminist without what I've learned from *The Second Sex*.

The ideas of people who've enacted harm populate my thinking, my theologizing. This situation—our indebtedness to people who've violated the lives of others—didn't seem to trouble Augustine, who in *On Christian Teaching* encourages his community of learners to glean knowledge from whomever, regardless of the taint of evil. Because, he argues, "wherever [the Christian] may find truth, it is the Lord's." We are like the Hebrews in the story of Exodus, Augustine explains, who took with them the silver and gold of Pharaoh's regime upon their liberation. We plunder the good from wherever we discover it "for the just use of teaching the gospel."

In 2013, the delegate assembly of my denomination, Mennonite Church USA, appointed me to our national governing body. Our first order of business, I soon discovered, was to commission a thorough investigation into John Howard Yoder's sexual abuse. In the mid-1980s, the theologian was removed from his seminary position and banned from campus events. A few years later his ministerial ordination was suspended; he soon relinquished it in order to preempt its termination by the disciplinary committee.

Despite the alert sounded within Mennonite institutions about Yoder's behavior, he was welcomed as a professor at Notre Dame and a founding fellow at the university's peace institute. After his death in 1997, a cloud of vagueness regarding his abusive behavior settled on his legacy—a haze that allowed many of us to shrug off those untoward stories as rumors, mere allegations, a sideshow to the main event: his landmark contribution to peace theology.

After our denominational investigation made Yoder's abuse indisputable, I had to rethink my automatic deference to the Augustinian position I outlined above. The notion that we can make use of knowledge wherever we find it, regardless of the oppressions bound to the production of that knowledge, doesn't seem to work for Yoder's peace theology, at least for me, because of the links we can now see that connect his life to his writing, his body to his mind, his deeds to his words. Not only how, in places, he developed arguments that justified his behavior. But also how his peace theology never took into consideration any sustained account of violence against women. Quite convenient for him, and tragic for the women he abused—as well as for the communities that, guided by his work, didn't think to worry about intimate partner violence and abusive relationships in church communities because they were taught instead to focus on the ethics of warfare and just policing.

My point is not that we should only ever learn from people who align with our moral vision. Again, I still read and think with Luther, Calvin, and de Beauvoir. Besides, none of us is without sin. But I do think it's worthwhile to notice, especially when we're thinking about Christian ethics, if someone's harmful patterns of behavior have taken up residence in their ideas—to notice whether a theologian's destructive inclinations have come along with their arguments like a stowaway. To listen for things we hadn't heard before: a note, an argument, an idea that now sounds harmful. ❑

The grace of deep-bellied laughter

Does our theology have space for a Jesus who not only weeps but also laughs?

by Yolanda Pierce

Yolanda Pierce is dean and professor at Vanderbilt Divinity School and author of In My Grandmother's House: Black Women, Faith, and the Stories We Inherit.

In *The Sacred Journey*, Frederick Buechner describes listening to George Buttrick, the renowned scholar, pastor, and preacher. Buttrick describes how Jesus is crowned king, again and again, in the hearts of believers, among "confession, and tears, and great laughter." Buechner is captivated by this idea of "great laughter," which he marks as the precipitating moment of his own spiritual conversion:

> It was the phrase *great laughter* that did it, did whatever it was that I believe must have been hiddenly in the doing all the years of my journey up till then. It was not so much that a door opened as that I suddenly found that a door had been open all along which I had only just then stumbled upon.

Reading this always makes me wonder if many of us cannot feel the power of God in our lives because while we have confession and tears aplenty, our lives are often devoid of great laughter. Does our theology have space for a Jesus who weeps and also laughs? Where and how can we experience this great laughter in hard times? In a world that is fraught with division, war, and despair, where can it even be found?

I recently had lunch with three dynamic colleagues. It was an impromptu meal at the tail end of a conference. I desperately needed to head back home, where ungraded papers, unanswered emails, and unmet needs waited for me in abundance. In my mind, I argued, I did not have time for what would surely be a leisurely lunch, in light of all that I had left undone at work. With the two hours I would spend at lunch, I reasoned

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that I could finish a lecture or pay some bills or try to get more than one step ahead of my busy schedule. But the prompting of the Holy Spirit led me to a small table, at an even smaller restaurant, where great laughter was the main dish. The food was excellent, and the company was even better.

Our conversation over lunch didn't begin with joy or laughter. All four of us were reacting to the news of the deaths of two Black women college presidents, who died at their respective institutions within a week of each other (see news story, p. 22). Since reading the news of the passing of JoAnne A. Epps of Temple University and Orinthia T. Montague of Volunteer State Community College, my soul has been downcast. I saw these two women as role models who had achieved success at the highest levels of my profession. Their untimely deaths had me evaluating what it cost them, and what it is costing me, to lead and succeed in higher education. Many days, the cost of the work feels too high. Battling unrealistic expectations, racial microaggressions, unfair performance standards, and a whole host of issues big and small leaves me wondering if I can ever succeed, and *thrive*, in the very spaces to which I feel called.

I didn't have time for lunch with my colleagues, but the Holy Spirit prompted me to go anyway.

Our lunchtime conversation began on this somber note, my dining companions also mourning with me over this news. But over food and conversation and shared concerns, our grief became coupled with joy as we celebrated the small career successes, the unexpected antics of young children, and the blessings of yet another year of surviving in the most unlikely of places. This great laughter was a balm for my soul. Until I was on my way back home, with memories of this lunch still feeding my spirit, I didn't realize how much I needed laughter, how much I needed that deep-bellied experience of laughing out loud at the funny, at the absurd, and even at myself. That laughter gave me room to count my blessings even as I was counting the costs.

We need to laugh until we cry on a regular basis. We need to experience the fullness of God's grace, with great laughter and mirth. If Jesus experienced everything that was common to humanity, then surely he laughed with his family and friends. Surely he experienced the joy, the humor, and the absurdity inherent in life. And while Jesus was a man who was despised, rejected, and well acquainted with sorrow, he also reassures us that blessed are those who weep, for they will one day laugh (Luke 6:21b). This is a divine promise that even in hard times joy and laughter can be found.

On my way home from lunch, I truly understood the power of laughter. It reminds us that the joy of the Lord is available if we are open to the beauty of even the simplest gifts: a good lunch with friends, the unfettered laughter of a child, the quizzical looks and head tilts from a puppy. And we can remember and experience that joy, again and again, when we laugh out loud, finding humor in the ordinary and extraordinary.

As we paid the check and departed from lunch, our waiter remarked that it looked like we were having a great time. We continued our laughter and conversation well into the parking lot. I pray that joy and laughter are contagious and provide a healing balm to those experiencing the hard times of life. I pray that laughter will lift some of the weight of the burdens we carry. I pray that we are reminded that joy will come again. ❑

Features

"The house can go from frantic to still, as if it were a little boat subject to winds no one can see or control."

—Amy Frykholm, *page 42*

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"At St. Peter's, people hear the call to love their neighbor. At McDonald's, they know what their neighbor smells like."

—Sharon Christner, *page 60*

At the Maria Skobtsova House, refugees and volunteers work to counteract the cruel logic of the refugee crisis.

An architecture of care in Calais

by Amy Frykholm

"NEVER UNDERESTIMATE the power of the house," reads a small sign hanging on the wall of the Maria Skobtsova House in Calais, a port city in northern France.

The house in question is a row house in a middle-class neighborhood with partially trimmed hedges and rose bushes. The only thing that sets this house apart from every other house on the block is a simple sign taped to the window that says, "Maria Skobtsova Refugee House."

On the day in June when I arrived, the front windows were wide open to catch a breeze. Ieva, a young Latvian woman and frequent volunteer, opened the door for me. We'd arranged to meet at 9:30 and maybe have prayer.

Maybe is a key word at the Maria Skobtsova House. Maybe we will have prayer. Maybe this is a day when no new refugees will come. Maybe several new families will arrive. Maybe everyone came in very late last night and will be sleeping this morning. Maybe the weather is good, and tonight refugees will try to reach the United Kingdom by crossing the English Channel in small boats. Maybe the weather is bad, and today is just a day for waiting. Maybe, as on this particular day, little Maryam will already be awake and toddling around, and prayer won't be quite as attractive as following her and trying to entice her to the table to eat something. (Names have been changed to protect those still in the process of seeking asylum.)

Maryam's mother, Layla, was at the stove in the tiny kitchen making Iranian-style scrambled eggs in tomato sauce. Ieva put on a pot of coffee. Asma, a Syrian woman also staying in the house, said no to eggs because she was fasting on the eve of Eid al-Adha. We used Google Translate to look up the word that Asma wanted to say about her intentions: "Forgiveness."

The motion of the house can go from frantic to still, as if it were a little boat on the ocean subject to winds that no one can see or control. Ordinary moments are interspersed with moments of intensity. Full stop; frantic motion. The only thing that volunteers are attempting to do is hold the space so that refugees, who are caught in political and social winds, might have a place to be restored. One of the things that providing hospitality means is taking on a refugee's own rhythm. Some days, Ieva says, are spent just sitting at the wide, wooden table and having coffee, welcoming one person after another, whoever they are, whatever they need. How you welcome one person, Ieva says, is how you welcome every person.

Other days are spent in trauma. In January, an Eritrean woman was separated from her children on the beach. It was dark, the smugglers saw the police coming, and they launched the boat with her children in it but not her. Years earlier, this woman had lost her son when crossing the Sahara desert and had spent seven years searching for him, through every government and international agency, until they were finally reunited. Now this. He and his half-siblings were crossing the

Illustration by Elizabeth Niemczyk

Settling

by Luci Shaw

A writer lifts her head to the sounds of
a recorded voice reading poetry: the words
brush against her ears, seeking a mind
to settle in. She notices how in the evening, the light
filters between the trees, fluidly, finding its way
down to the ground, the way water
flows from the tap between her fingers,
and settles, pooling where it falls.

Her cat, settled in her lap, purrs: "Thank you for
being warm, and kind, and for the new poems
you are writing while you scratch behind my ears.
Now, do it again. Again. Just don't stop."

LUCI SHAW *is author of more than 30 books of poetry and creative nonfiction.*

Channel without her. She had an emotional and psychological breakdown on the beach. After some time in the hospital, she came to the house to recuperate and figure out what to do next. It is not uncommon for people to arrive at the house wet, injured, exhausted, dirty, and hopeless.

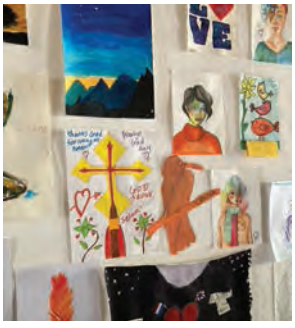
The house's origins lie in an impromptu camp in Calais that came to be called the Jungle. Calais is the closest potential crossing point to the UK, a destination for many refugees. In 2015, in the midst of one wave of the ongoing worldwide refugee crisis, refugees came to Calais from all over the world but predominantly from the Middle East, Africa, and Afghanistan.

The Jungle, which housed more than 10,000 refugees at its peak, was in one sense just a set of tents and muddy pathways where people who had no other options landed. But it became a place where refugees worked with a wide array of organizations and initiatives to create what researchers Dan Hicks and Sarah Mallet call "an architecture of care and dignity." People—refugees and sympathetic observers—organized clothing distribution, food distribution, a library, playgrounds, arts and crafts, women's and children's centers, chapels, and mosques in the camp.

This is where a Catholic Worker named Patricia McDwyer-Wendzinski, a monk named Brother Johannes, and a Baptist minister named Simon Jones met Eritrean refugees who had set up a small chapel. Through praying with these refugees and discussing the situation in the camp with them, they discerned the need for a house that would be a refuge for the many volunteers working in the camp. They were inspired by the work of 20th-century Orthodox nun and saint Maria Skobtsova, who set up houses for refugees in Paris. Once the house was available, volunteers used it for respite—but soon they started bringing refugees to the house as well. So-and-so had a broken arm. So-and-so was very sick. So-and-so was traveling alone and was unsafe. The house became a refuge for those on this path who were especially vulnerable.

In 2016, the local government bulldozed the camp. Six thousand residents were dispersed to temporary reception centers around France. The remaining people scattered into more makeshift and informal settlements throughout northern France. The mayor of Calais, Natacha Bouchart, has since instituted a policy of no permanence, and she has instructed the police to destroy any camp or settlement they find within three days. She has also repeatedly attempted to ban food and clothing distribution, an act that was struck down by a local judge in the fall of 2022.

Dispersing the camps does nothing to address the real human crisis, but none of the governments experiencing an inflow of refugees has been capable of the kind of long-term thinking that would create an alternative architecture of dignity. Instead governments have been implicated in bolstering the work of smugglers and increasing the misery of refugees. Recently the UK government has tried telling refugees, via a



Scenes from inside Maria Skobtsova House in Calais, in northern France

law that took effect in July 2023, that they will not be able to apply for asylum if they come by small boat or by truck. It has floated the idea of sending them all to Rwanda as a "safe third country," an idea struck down by courts. It tried housing refugees on a barge that quickly became unsanitary and unsafe. These laws and attempts to discourage refugees through what we might call an architecture of suffering have done nothing to stop the flow.

Into the gaps created by governmental failures and criminal gangs working as smugglers have stepped a variety of organizations who work together to create if not a safety net for what is an extremely dangerous and hazardous path, then a kind of patchwork. In Calais, a group called Utopia 56 drives around the city assessing the refugee situation on any given day: the size of the camps, the conditions of the people, any injuries. They assess what kind of needs people in the camp have. They keep an eye out for women and children. When they see specific needs, they might call the Refugee Women's Centre, which no longer exists as a physical center but has volunteers who drive around in a van, park on the edges of camps, and distribute food, clothing, shoes, outdoor gear, and whatever else they may have.

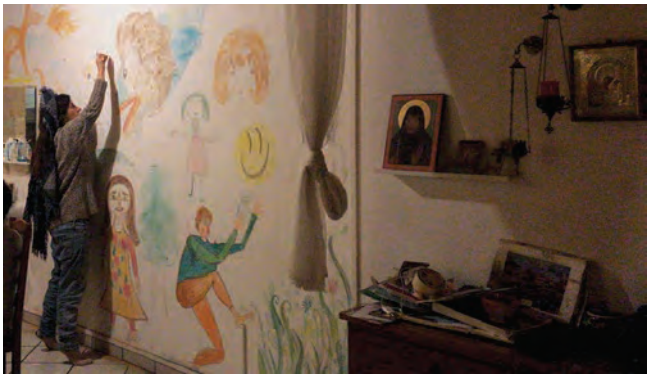
When they see specific housing needs, they call the volunteers at the Maria Skobtsova House and bring over refugees. The house continues to welcome both refugees and volunteers from all over the world. There is a network of such houses in Calais, small in number, informally organized, and always under the threat of being shut down by a hostile local government.

"Why does everyone want to go to the UK?" I asked three volunteers—Ieva, a Brit named Alex, and Joelle, a French nun—as we sat out on the concrete patio after prayer one morning.

"There isn't one answer to this question," Ieva said. For some people, it's language, culture, a sense of familiarity. For others, relatives live there. Others are fed by rumors that the UK is more receptive to their plight than other European countries. Others have been kicked out of the EU but have nowhere safe to go. For many the UK is the country of last resort.

In the afternoon of the day I spent at the house, a new family arrived with two volunteers from the Refugee Women's Centre. Wahiba, the mother, broke her foot in one of the trenches dug by French police to keep people from getting to the beach. (The French government has an agreement with the UK government, which pays it for its prevention efforts.) She was determined, however, that the family would cross

AMY FRYKHOLM AND ALEX HOLMES



More scenes from inside Maria Skobtsova House in Calais, in northern France

and soon. In her native Sudan, Wahiba was a human rights lawyer. Her husband, Mustafa, was a political scientist and journalist whose work was primarily focused on Nile Basin food security. His outspokenness made him a target of multiple governments. The family had been on the road for three years.

Their son, Amani, is five and speaks beautiful, clear French. Asim is three and was born in Italy. Little Ayman was born just eight months earlier in France. The parents joked that the day they arrived in Great Britain would be their birthdays, their new wedding anniversary, and the start of an entirely new life. But first they had to get there.

The way that all refugees who end up in Calais do this is by paying smugglers. The house maintains a precarious existence between smugglers and governments. Volunteers have no contact with smugglers and are scrupulous about focusing their efforts on hospitality and the architecture of dignity. They worry constantly that the government will appear with an eviction notice one random day. When a surprise inspector came just two weeks before my visit, he grumbled about the stairs not being wide enough. The threat was clear enough.

All the crossings happen at night. While the French police try to prevent launchings, once the boats are in the water they do not try to stop them or perform rescue operations. It is very dangerous to rescue people who don't want to be rescued, Ieva told me. According to volunteers, the French coast guard will sometimes even accompany the boats to English waters to ensure their safe crossing.

The little boats that launch from Calais have as many as 60 refugees on them, but the smugglers don't travel with them to ensure safe passage. Instead they "hire" a refugee to serve as "captain" for the crossing. This person, usually a young man with little or no experience, is given a discount for the crossing and will take the fall if anything goes wrong. This means that the smugglers themselves are protected from the exposure that crossing creates.

The boats' motors are not equipped to take them all the way across the channel, a distance of about 20 miles. The motors are intended to die in British waters, where the British coast guard will perform a rescue, take the refugees into custody, and process their asylum claims. The British government maintains a daily website that publishes how many people attempted to cross in how many boats and how many "uncontrolled landings" occurred. At present, the British government aims to prevent uncontrolled landings. It prefers to pick up would-be refugees in the water. Some nights the British coast guard apprehends upward of 50 boats, other nights none at all. In August, a boat capsized when its engine failed, and six young Afghan men were killed.

If all of this sounds impossibly dangerous, consider that international law provides for almost no safe routes for an

AMY FRYKHOLM AND ALEX HOLMES

Wonderments

by Peter Cooley

Our longest sun sets at right descensions, and makes but winter arches, and therefore it cannot be long before we lie down in darkness, and have our light in ashes; since the brother of death daily haunts us with dying mementos, and time that grows old in itself, bids us hope no long duration.
—Sir Thomas Browne, *Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial*

A day of quiet wonder in my hands
holding nothing but bewilderment
at the green world knocking on my window—
I am alive! fresh from harrowing
my address book, a kind of columbarium
page-after-page, of the too-soon-
too-many-dead. Bob, heart attack,
at fifty-five, Amelia, throat cancer, sixty,
Jane, double-vaccinated, Covid, seventy,
all of them here, then a moment, suddenly—

suddenly, even the long death of my mother
I watched, while I sat beside her
weeks, with the hospice nurse, dazed,
then suddenly, her eyes glazed over,
a yellow glare of translucent cellophane
all her gaze, transfixed on mine
as if she'd seen enough of me for a while—

In a minute now I will go out
into the terrible gift of the sun
just one of my unaccountable, unasked fors—

If I disbelieved in coincidence,
which I do not, I might think it coincidental,
not heaven-sent that this is the first
day of Spring and this afternoon
I will need to buy a new, gold-embossed
leather-bound address book,
if they still sell such antiquities,
one which will outlast my being here.

In the life to come, I believe
I will look back on this, look down on this,
wondering while I was here
how long I thought I might need
that address book, its inchoate,
un-fingered, immaculate, sheer white pages—

PETER COOLEY *is poetry editor of* Christianity and Literature. *His 11th book of poetry is* The One Certain Thing.

When a government inspector made an unannounced visit to the house, he grumbled about the stairs not being wide enough. The threat was clear enough.

asylum seeker to take. The most straightforward way to receive asylum is to arrive in the country in question and ask.

Wahiba and Mustafa spent the afternoon bathing and feeding their children. They were both exceedingly gentle with these motions, as if life on the road afforded them no irritability. While Asim received his bath, Amani and I played Legos on the floor of the living room that is also a chapel. "Can you build me a machine?" I asked him. He looked skeptical but also intrigued by the idea. He built himself an elaborate machine and me a simpler one.

Rachel and Joseph, two married American Mennonite volunteers, returned with their own children from school, and suddenly there were seven children in the house, all running around. A volunteer played chess with Layla's son, Yousef, and other boys gathered around to watch. Rachel was the evening's cook, and "We are having American food!" reverberated around the house. Rachel improvised a vegetarian chili and made "corn bread" out of what appeared to be a large bag of donated semolina.

At dinner, all gathered around, even though Mustafa, like Asma, was fasting for the Eid. In the kitchen, Layla told me that she will never, ever go back to Iran, despite the ten brothers and sisters who live there, the mother who longs for her, and their ancestral land. I didn't fully understand what was behind this *never,* but I heard its force. One of the unspoken rules of the house is not to ask for stories that are not offered. Many things happen to force people out of their countries, and many other things happen on the road that add trauma to difficulty and difficulty to trauma.

After dinner was cleaned up, Alex and Amani invented a game where they built a rocket to the moon. "A la lune!" Amani cried as he spun around the house with his rocket. "A la lune!" everyone cried in response.

I left the house as the sun was setting and walked back to my Airbnb nearby. On each of the next five days, the UK website said zero boats and zero people. The wind was gusty across the Channel. Then one day, the website reported three boats, 155 people. There was no way for me to know if Mustafa and Wahiba, Layla, Yousef, Maryam, and Asma were among them.

Meanwhile, the house on the edge of France continues on. People come and they go. Volunteers and refugees alike arrive, make coffee, play chess and Legos, pray, wait, try to imagine the unimaginable and control the uncontrollable; they plant seeds in containers on the patio or water those seeds that they likely won't be around to see flower or fruit.

Those searching for viable, humane alternatives to today's architecture of suffering propose several things that might allow people to claim asylum without having to take harrowing journeys. Could there be a global humanitarian asylum visa system, accessible beyond the borders of the countries where refugees believe they will be safe and have their best chance to survive and thrive? Could there be ways to create migration pathways that include community sponsorship, employment and education opportunities, and family reunion centers? Given all the money that governments pour into failed prevention and the architecture of suffering, and given the fact that these efforts have done little but bolster smugglers and traffickers, might they instead pour these resources into creating legal aid and humane conditions? As long as the answer to these questions is still no, as long as those lacking humane imaginations still dominate governments, places like the Maria Skobtsova House provide vital links.

Philosopher Donna Haraway has proposed calling the current age the Chthulucene, taken from the Greek word *chthonos*, meaning "of the earth." The Chthulucene, she says, is a time full of refugees—humans, animals, and plants. Living well in this era means participating in the reconstitution of refuges, places where these many refugees can find safety, rest, and peace. If global solutions to the massive global refugee crisis evade every world government, if safe routes are still too utopian an idea, these refuges will be needed. Look for a little sign in the window, on an ordinary street, next to a rosebush, where the door is open and the coffee is on. ❑

AMY FRYKHOLM *is a senior editor at the* CENTURY.

Treescapes, South

by Sarah Gordon

1
Longleaf Pine

Slivers of life, bundles
and rolls and bags.
Subtle, *Subtilis*:
finely woven
ground traps,
hiding places.
Did you know
the needles make
baskets and soft paths
as well as paper cuts?

2
Magnolia

My mother had a pair of ten-foot
clippers resembling giant tweezers,
and with them she'd snip the blossoms
way high up. They'd fall into our arms
mostly, some hit the ground, but
we took care not to bruise or lose
a petal of those openhearted gifts,
that consecrated beauty.

3
Chinaberry

What a pelt of soft hurt
those berries could be—
small golden projectiles
to aim at the enemy
or squash beneath
your feet. Do you prefer
to climb for assault
or hover below
and cover your head?

4
Dogwood

The crown of thorns
and Christ's wounds:
The flowers little bloodstained +'s.
I touched the hurt to see
if the scarlet would smear
and make me part
of that tree.
I don't think I thought
to pray.

SARAH GORDON *is author of the poetry collection* Six White Horses, *forthcoming from Mercer University Press.*

"Abortion is not abstract," says Katey Zeh, CEO of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. "It happens within the context of a real person's life."

Seeing abortion access as a blessing

interview by Annelisa Burns

Katey Zeh is CEO *of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, a multifaith organization that advocates for safe and legal abortion access, provides spiritual companionship through abortions, trains faith leaders and activists, and more. Zeh is an ordained Baptist minister, a writer, and a member of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America's clergy advocacy board. She is author of* A Complicated Choice: Making Space for Grief and Healing in the Pro-Choice Movement *and* Women Rise Up: Sacred Stories of Resistance for Today's Revolution.

Tell us about the origins of the RCRC.

Our roots go back to the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion of the late '60s and early '70s. These were clergy who helped people get access to safe abortion care pre-*Roe*. They saw that people were suffering and dying from a lack of access to safe abortion care, and they felt like it was their call to care for their community. Since 1973, we've expanded our mission and changed our name from the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights to the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

What do you do?

A variety of things. We bless abortion clinics. We work with faith leaders, giving them the language and understanding so they can become advocates in their own communities. We train a new generation of activists and have a whole program for students. We also train people who regularly come in physical contact with people having abortions, like abortion doulas, on how to be there if people have spiritual questions about what's going on, so they can do that work without going to seminary.

We also provide spiritual companionship, walking alongside people before, during, and after their abortions. Nowadays, it's often virtual through our spiritual companion site, abortionswelcome.org. I also have people who just show up in my DMs on Instagram needing a space to share their experiences. That looks like me just receiving the story and affirming it, or doing phone calls with people who are struggling with their decision and offering a compassionate ear that assures them that they're loved and that they know what they need.

What is reproductive justice?

In the early 1990s, a group of Indigenous women created a reproductive justice framework. Around the same time, a group of 12 Black women, who called themselves the "Mothers of Reproductive Justice," came up with a framework of their own.

The tenets of reproductive justice now include the right to have children, the right not to have children, the right to parent

Minister and writer Katey Zeh

JOHN NOLTNER

your children in safe and sustainable communities, and the right to bodily autonomy and pleasure. Bodily autonomy and pleasure are more recent additions. It's an intersectional frame, inclusive of racial justice, economic justice, LGBTQ justice, et cetera.

However, while the RCRC is informed by this reproductive justice framework, we actually don't identify as a reproductive justice organization.

Why is that?

Reproductive justice organizations are primarily led by people of color. We don't want to co-opt other people's frames or language. Although I've also heard some reproductive justice leaders say that everybody needs to be using this frame! To me, the most important thing is how we align with these values in the work that we do, whatever we call ourselves.

We identify primarily as a faith-based organization. There are very few of us who do this work. Our multifaith approach and our roots in faith tradition are unique.

Can you say more about the importance of accounting for intersecting identities and lifting up marginalized people in this work?

It comes from a liberation framework: How do we center the people who are most impacted by injustice? Those are usually people who are living at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression at the same time. People of color, immigrants, young people, queer people, people living with disabilities, poor people—they are all already coming up against a lot of barriers just to exist. Making sure that they have access to affordable, culturally competent care is important. If they have access to it, then everybody else does.

Intersectionality also means looking at not just abortion care but all of the other things that are connected to our reproductive lives. We need a lot of things to thrive. Folks who are marginalized lack access to the things that they need to thrive, and that includes abortion care, but there's a whole lot more.

Why do you think so many people assume an opposition between Christianity and abortion?

White Christian nationalists deliberately placed abortion at the forefront of the political agenda as a way to bring people together—people who would otherwise not agree—to vote. They've put forward a dominant narrative about Christianity and abortion: that they're antithetical to each other, that to be a true Christian means that you vote a certain way and hold this particular belief. And this has won them many elections. We're all subject to this narrative—no matter what tradition we come from or what our personal beliefs are—that "Christians are antiabortion." But we know that statistically it's not

Milk and Ashes

by Israel Zoberman

In the 1948 photo my grandpa
Tzvi feeds me milk from a cup
while walking together in the
Displaced Persons Camp
of Wetzlar, Germany.
When he died in Chicago,
I inherited his ashtray
and our family's smoke
which blackened heavens.

ISRAEL ZOBERMAN *is founder of Temple Lev Tikvah and honorary senior rabbi scholar at Eastern Shore Chapel Episcopal Church, both in Virginia Beach.*

true. The majority of people of faith in the US, including Catholics, identify as pro-choice.

Is there a theological argument for being pro-choice?
The mysteries around when life begins and when it ends and what it means are ancient and timeless. These are *the* questions about what it means to be human. I think there's a lot of hubris in being so clear about when life begins or what it means. These are beautiful mysteries that we just honestly don't have the answers to. In the Christian texts, while people will point to things, in reality there's nothing specific about abortion or fetal life at all.

What is very clear, from my perspective and from the perspective of people whose legacy I stand on now, is that there are people in our communities who need access to abortion care and who are suffering because they can't get it. As a person of faith, there is nothing unclear about the call to care for my neighbor—to be compassionate—in the scriptures. Jesus cared for the person in front of him who was being oppressed by state-sanctioned rules that did not honor their humanity. Jesus asked what they needed and centered that person rather than abiding by rules that might've limited what he was able to do for them in terms of their healing.

When you put it like that, it sounds so clear and simple.
It is for me! I've never really had that internal struggle: Is this something I should support or not? For me, it's just always been crystal clear because of that call to ministry, of caring for the person who's in front of me.

How did you come to this calling?
As a Yale Divinity School student, I did a training session with the RCRC. Afterward, I asked the nearest Planned Parenthood if I could do a tour. When I arrived, these protesters outside assumed I was there to have an abortion. I experienced abortion stigma directed at me. I also realized I wanted them to know that I wasn't there to have an abortion—an internalized stigma I had to work through.

Inside the clinic, I was amazed at how kind and loving the staff were. I thought it was so messed up that the Christian people were outside being awful while the ministry was happening inside.

I started volunteering in the recovery room. One day they needed me in the procedure room, so I went and held patients' hands. This was a transformative moment for me, to be there for people in the middle of their procedures. I was super awkward and I didn't know what to say or do—and that was OK, because at that moment, all that was required of me was my presence.

That's a powerful example of embodied ministry.
It really does feel like my call to ministry, just being in that procedure room. When I get caught up with the abstract stuff, I think about all of the people I met there and the people who

"I thought it was so messed up: the Christians were outside the Planned Parenthood clinic being awful while the ministry was happening inside."

have told me their abortion stories since then, and I understand that abortion is not abstract. It happens within the context of a real person's life.

What kind of language do you use when speaking about abortion that's both trauma-informed and destigmatizing?
I wrote my second book because I was tired of the two binary stories about people's abortion experiences—either it was the worst thing ever and they regret it, or it was no big deal, like getting your tonsils out. Those stories can be true, but most of the people I talk to are somewhere in between.

For me, the pro-choice/pro-life labels aren't especially helpful. They're abstract. What I am is pro people's abortion stories and pro allowing the person in front of me to name what the experience means for them. What does this mean to you?

I talk about abortion as a blessing. People have told me that it saved their lives or was a catalyst for them to make changes. I know that's not true for everybody, but I think it's really important to use positive language. It's like being pro-divorce. Divorce is painful for many people, and it's amazing when you need it. Even if the experience is painful or complicated, in the end, having access to it is a blessing.

Can you say more about the kinds of intense emotions people associate with their abortions?
Simply accessing abortion care can be traumatic because of all the barriers that are there and all of the stigma. What's traumatizing about abortion is, for the most part, the stigma.

It's really important for people, as they're having an emotional experience around an abortion, to start recognizing that some of those emotions are informed by the stigma, and to start connecting their normal human feelings about making a big decision to a narrative they've been told about abortion. We've got to create more space for people to feel emotions. When you make any big decision, it's normal to feel grief and relief at the same time. That doesn't mean it was a bad thing; it just means it was a human thing.

It's a rough time to be working for abortion rights. How do you stay hopeful?
You have to realize that there is a reality beyond the political realm. There are people who will always make sure that people who need access to reproductive health care will get it. We know that to be true historically, since biblical times. Politics, though important, are not the only reality.

I also remember that there are many, many people alongside me who are doing this work. It's not just on me and my organization. Hope is a communal discipline. I don't feel hopeful every day. There are days when I can't get out of bed, but I know that someone else got out of bed. And tomorrow, I'll be ready and maybe they can take a break.

I think that's part of being a person of faith: you trust that, as long as I'm answering my calling, in community, we are going to get there.

What are some concrete steps that people who want to support abortion access can take?
It's important for everybody to think through the messages that they got, implicit or explicit, about abortion that they need to work through before they do anything else. Having those conversations within your own friend group, family, community—that's really where this stuff starts to change.

Abortion funds are great organizations to support, because they really have been doing this work on the ground for a long time. The National Network of Abortion Funds has a list so you can find funds in your area. ❑

ANNELISA BURNS *is a* CENTURY *research fellow.*

Essays by readers

Sleep

It's a surrender, a laying down of arms . . . a rehearsal for the final laying down of arms, of course, when you trust yourself to the same unseen benevolence to see you through the dark and to wake you when the time comes—with new hope, new strength—into the return again of light.

—Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*

THERE'S A SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL I read in my early 20s that postulates a future when genetic engineering would allow some people—the wealthiest and most privileged, of course—to be sleepless, never needing to spend five to eight hours of their days motionless and dreaming in the dark.

At the time, this sounded like the best idea I'd come across. Imagine not needing to sleep. Admittedly, at that age I wasn't planning to do anything world-changing with the ability. All I wanted to do was to be able to sit reading or watching movies all night, every night. It was the idea of sitting up, awake with no sense that my body wanted or needed to sleep through those long hours between ten and six, that intrigued me.

Of course, this was well before I ever experienced my first bout of insomnia and got a sense of what sleepless really meant—lying awake while it feels like the whole world is sleeping, feeling stuck in a body that wants so much to drift off into dreams but with a mind convinced that it is time to be awake.

I suppose it'd be different if the need to sleep wasn't preprogrammed in my genes, but that novel and its characters who stare into the dark all night, every night sound a lot like hell to me now. Like something that a cleft-tailed, pitchfork-bearing creature would dream up to torture greedy souls. Greed, after all, was what my daydreams around the novel were made of—the desire for more time than I normally got, even if it would be used for entertainment purposes only.

But now, on nights when I turn and turn and turn in bed before finally getting up to read or play sudoku until sleep or sunrise comes, I don't want anything more than what I, at that moment, cannot have. I want nothing else than to lie down like every other creature and give up those hours to vulnerability and motionlessness. To surrender just a few moments and admit that all the other minutes in the day are enough.

Jonathan Bennett
Lakeland, TN

I have had long COVID for over three years. I am improving, but chronic fatigue means that I sleep a lot. And, of course, I dream.

I have always been curious about my dreams. So, unable to do much else, I have begun studying Jungian dream interpretation. I record my dreams every morning. Sometimes my dreams are processing events from the previous day. More often they are communications from my unconscious self.

When our culture tells us to follow our dreams, it means our daydreams. In my daydreams, I am always the hero. I am always right. I always succeed. Daydreams are laser-focused on the values I learned from my family, my culture, or advertisers speaking through my screens. My daydreams are ignorant of the challenges that I will meet in a changing world. They are naive about the ways my personality will complicate and frustrate their golden visions. And they don't come from my heart. So, they never work out in real life.

The dreams that arise in the night, however, steer me through ever-changing circumstances. They are brutally honest about my faults. Yet they also offer compassionate encouragement in my journey toward wholeness.

I am learning to read the language of my dreams. That language is as personal as the verbal shorthand my wife and I have developed over half a century together. It is as universal as a wedding feast. You will never dream about the house that I grew up in, nor I yours. But either of them may point to whatever we mean by Ithaca or Eden or home.

I have learned that the person who wears my face in most of my dreams is usually the least trustworthy character. He is my ego—the person I think I am. The other characters—birds, animals, automobiles, witches, gnomes, my first boss, my third-grade teacher, my mother and father—are all there to help me face what life requires of me right now. My dreams are wiser than all the self-help books and academic philosophies I have ever read.

I have noticed, as Carl Jung did, that some characters appear over and over again. Since I am a cisgender man, my soul usually appears as a woman. She may be attractive or ugly, furious or comforting, depending on how my ego relates

CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: PIXABAY / PEXELS | GOYA / METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART | PEKIC / E+ / GETTY | ODILON REDON / METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART (NY)

When our culture tells us to follow our dreams, it means our daydreams. In my daydreams, I am always the hero.

to her. I also often meet a man who is my shadow—those parts of my personality that I do not acknowledge or accept. In some dreams he may want to kill me. In others, he may be someone I despise—or look up to, because there is such a thing as a "golden shadow," positive aspects of myself that I don't own in my waking life.

Listening to my dreams has convinced me that I am walking the road of life with a teacher who speaks only in parables. These parables are often painful. In my dream I may see a politician I despise. I cringe when I realize, in the morning, that I am that man. Then, I feel a kind of relief as self-righteousness and shame fall away and I hear the good news that all of me is accepted in some deep way.

The next night, people gather at tables in a church basement. I see familiar faces. Others are strangers who look like they were dragged in off the street. Someone who died a decade ago comes out of the kitchen wiping her hands on a towel and embraces me, and whatever pain there was between us disappears.

As I go to sleep, I often think of Ebenezer Scrooge. Dickens sends him three spirits on the night before Christmas. To the last and most frightening, Scrooge says, "As I know your purpose is to do me good, and as I hope to live to be another man from what I was, I am prepared to bear you company, and do it with a thankful heart." I think I know what he means.

Roger Talbott
Jackson Heights, NY

A witch curses a beautiful princess, and she falls into an enchanted sleep. Various princes, determined to break the spell, try to break through the thorny hedge surrounding her castle but are trapped and die. Finally, a hundred years have passed. Another prince arrives. There is nothing special about him, but he has come at the right time. When he pushes through the thicket, it parts to let him pass into the castle where, in the highest tower, he finds the sleeping princess. He kisses her and the spell is broken.

"Sleeping Beauty" was never my kind of story when I was young. This was not because of any precocious feminist awareness about the creepiness of princes lurking about kissing unconscious people. I'm Gen X, and like many women my age I came to concepts like consent and self-protection a little late. Some of the stories I liked were as problematic as "Sleeping Beauty"—but they were stories where women got to do interesting things. I wanted to be a protagonist, not a prize. And I certainly didn't want to be helpless or vulnerable.

When I was 17, I attended my first frat party. An acquaintance noticed a guy following me around and whispered that I should be careful, because he had a reputation for assaulting women. The people who had driven me to the party had disappeared, and I wasn't prepared to walk miles through town at 2 a.m. but didn't want to be alone with the predator either. So I crawled behind the giant boxy television in the corner, then stayed awake until morning came and I could walk back to campus.

Many women have experienced far worse in similar situations, and I experienced worse myself later in life. That time I happened to be lucky, but the truth is that no matter how adventurous we are, boldly claiming our right to be protagonists in our own stories, we are still vulnerable as women in a patriarchal society. Most women, at a young age, learn to carry their keys between their knuckles. We establish code words with friends and allies. People of color and LGBTQ people develop parallel methods of vigilance. Relaxation can compound vulnerability. Not everyone can afford the luxury of sleep.

The term *woke* comes from African American Vernacular English and means "alert to racial injustice." In recent years, right-wing activists have rolled out a scare campaign against "woke ideology." Of course, it serves the ends of anti-Black racism to subvert the word's meaning and twist it into something negative. Oppressors don't want their victims shaping

words and their meanings, and they certainly don't want them awake and aware.

While I can't imagine what it's like to maintain vigilance against unremitting racism, I do know the exhaustion of being a woman in rape culture and being ethnically Jewish at a time of rising antisemitic hate. So the vulnerability of sleep takes on a double signification. On the one hand, it is terrifying. It's like the Weeping Angels in *Doctor Who*: if you look away even for a second, they attack. But it also seems like the ultimate luxury, to be able to relax your vigilance and let unconsciousness embrace you, sinking into the many dream worlds of the night.

Predators who drug women want their victims helpless. Fascist book-banning movements want a docile and unaware society. Philosophers from Plato to Kant to Marx have used metaphors of awakening to speak of moral and intellectual awareness. Jesus tells his followers to remain alert, because we "never know the day or the hour," and asks his disciples to stay awake with him. But staying awake can be agonizing.

Sometimes I think about the princess, asleep in her castle, rapt in visions that belong to her alone. I imagine brambles growing higher. All the princes are caught on the thorns. No one bothers Sleeping Beauty. She just gets to keep on resting.

Rebecca Bratten Weiss
Hopedale, OH

As a child, my first exposure to the big questions, to theology, to metaphysics, came in my sleep. During my slumber, I recall seeing a deep, stark, inkwell-black abyss. In the midst of that blackness, brightly colored children's refrigerator magnet alphabet letters danced. After this dream I began to wonder if—maybe even believe that—this life is all there is. Upon death, I thought, there is just blackness (and brightly colored dancing letters).

As a youth in Burns Flat, Oklahoma, I ran down the middle of the street in my sleep, yelling, "The wolves are chasing me! The wolves are chasing me!" Back in Pennsylvania, I urinated in the trash can, believing it to be the toilet, in my sleep. I attempted a nocturnal escape in my sleep, valiantly trying to climb out the second-story bedroom window of the house. As an adult, I can sleep anywhere—at a stop sign, a red light, and especially a movie theater (those are expensive naps). I am so good at sleeping anywhere that my efforts earned a diagnosis, narcolepsy.

The Hebrew Bible includes a few unique individual experiences brought about under the stars. Sleep is the catalyst through which we learn about multi-eyed flying beings. The sacred text uses the art of story via sleep to educate the reader about dragons and winged lions, bears eating barbeque, a four-headed leopard, and speaking animal horns.

During sleep, our body miraculously fixes its physiological self. Our conscious and subconscious dance and bring about wonderment; our gray matter grows and improves our focus upon waking. The Dalai Lama calls sleep the best meditation. Buechner called it surrender. If we are intentional about that surrender, we will be better for it.

Ricky Higby
Wetumpka, AL

I had come to grief at drama school, where I had hoped to develop a talent for acting. It was my first year after college, and owing to various kinds of stress, I found myself unable to finish the term and dropped out. That summer I knocked around a bit and in the fall, I fell prey to serious insomnia. Three days was the maximum period I went without sleep. Compared to Sylvia Plath's 14, it was a drop in the bucket. But it sufficed.

After the initial, appalling three days, sleep came intermittently, with molasses-like slowness, as desire struggled against resistance into the early morning hours. There were books on the bedside table. I would turn on the light, thumb through a few pages, lose concentration, turn off the light, lie in the dark, turn on the light, turn it off again.

There is a tincture of madness in insomnia. Did I know it? Perhaps. Beneath the frozen surface of unmoving time, an inkling of the underlying chaos and conflict survives. But introspection was not part of the sheer white blanket of abstraction that engulfed me, an abstraction symbolized by the face of a clock implacable in denial, not to be moved by prayer or threat.

Help did not come from the hills, as the psalm has it; rather, it was channeled through a book, Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace*. Weil is unshakable in her admiration for the Greeks and her contempt for the Romans. She studied classical Greek to read Plato and the New Testament. The foreign alphabet, she observed, has a secondary value: it focuses the mind. This seemed promising. But why Greek? Why not Russian?

In my boarding school there had been a French teacher who was Russian, an elderly spinster who had more character, to my mind, than anyone else at the school. I did not take her French class, but I did take a class in Russian, on special offer for eligible students. We didn't learn much in the way of grammar, just the accusative case in the feminine gender plus some songs, stories, and excerpts from the great novels.

So it was that I enrolled in a Russian class at Hunter College in New York, and what do you know, the foreign alphabet did its work. I began to sleep normally and put the unhappy interlude behind me. Moreover, I had found a direction: the following fall I matriculated in the Slavic Department at Columbia. The academic path was to work out no better than the acting career had—overwhelmed by family problems, I flunked my comprehensives. But I also won a prize for translation, so all was not lost.

As time went by and my life began to take a more stable course, the translation of Russian poetry and drama became an important part of it. As did sleep, which I came to enjoy the

When my baby daughter died, the hospital sent us home with nearly every blanket her body had ever rested on.

way some people enjoy chocolate. But the distant echo of that insomniac period haunts me from time to time, when I read of others who have experienced a similar outrage to the psyche. To lose what Shakespeare calls the "chief nourisher in life's feast" is a loss as deep as a well.

Betsy Hulick
New York, NY

During the months my baby daughter lay in an intensive care unit bassinet dying, I would lie on the plastic and foam hospital couch in her room and grasp around for my most comforting memory, something to hold close to my chest while she lay encased in plastic and tubing. It was always the feeling of cotton lightly falling in a kind of sigh over my body, curled in my bed half asleep. The sound of my mother walking quietly into my room, straightening the blankets, covering me up.

In the neonatal, the pediatric, and finally the cardiovascular ICUs, Kit was just a baby, too young to be covered, but they placed covers beneath her. Brightly colored, cartoon charactered, hand crocheted or knitted, all donated for the babies in critical condition. With my other four children, I had never placed a blanket in a crib—too risky—but I trusted that a blanket was the least of her dangers. When she died, they sent us home with stacks of them, nearly every blanket her body had ever rested on. I saved every single one.

A year and a half later, I am up in the middle of the night with Kit's baby brother she never met. He doesn't sleep well, and if I'm honest, I'm grateful for it. Grateful for those hours sitting holding him like the hours I sat and held her. Except I can lay him back in his crib, at home, without the aid of two nurses to adjust a feeding tube, breathing tube, wires, and monitors. I can pick him up when I choose, lay him down as I choose. I try, one night, to sleep with him next to me in bed, but I can't. It's too similar, so very close to the night I spent curled around Kit, who never woke up at the end, just drifted from sleep to deeper sleep.

She was diagnosed with her heart condition—tetralogy of Fallot with major aortopulmonary collateral arteries—at the 20-week anatomy ultrasound. Our other four children had never had so much as an ear infection; I told nurses that often. I told that to everyone who would listen. Kit had a random genetic deletion—DiGeorge or 22q11.2 deletion syndrome—that could happen to anyone. It actually does happen to one in 2,000. But then the heart condition and the MAPCAs were rarer. I did the math: she was one in 44,000, but she had a 75 percent chance of survival in the first year.

After the diagnosis, I begged God for signs. I wanted to know if she would die. Gideon set out the fleece, a covering, and God answered. I prayed, and I studied, and still I didn't know. Each week we drove the hour to the large city hospital, where we met with doctors and had high-risk ultrasounds. The final week before her scheduled induction, I toured the CICU and fainted at the sight of the babies in their machinery. God gave me no answer. Christ's blood covers our sins. Love covers all offenses. I covered my face with my hands.

Every week at church, I wept. I felt exposed in my grief, like it showed exactly how small my faith was. I did not expect her to survive. The women at church told me they were covering us in prayer. Another sigh, a whisper over the body, the laying on of hands.

In the night, after I lay my son in the crib, I cover up each of my surviving daughters, moving quietly in the dim glow of night-lights. My youngest daughter, the one who was only two when Kit died, sleeps with four covers, thin layers she likes in order: the unicorn blanket from my mother, the stiff quilt from my grandmother, the avocado-print fleece from my mother-in-law, and finally a pink crocheted blanket that was Kit's. My grandmother has not met three of my children, and my mother-in-law stopped speaking to her son after our grief uncovered years of hurt he couldn't keep buried any longer. I don't know who made Kit's blanket.

This one barely touched her, folded neatly at the end of the adult-sized hospital bed the nurses had rolled in for us to sleep together on her final night. The other parents, the doctors, and the nurses, closed the doors to every room in the unit and stood in silence as the beds were exchanged and Kit was gently moved.

The next day, when she left us, it felt like a sigh, like a hand removed from the shoulder.

My husband and I both held her, and we were too hot under the hospital covers they'd placed between us and her, the ones they held up to hide our view of the life support lines as they snapped them. A quick, plastic snap. The nurses dimmed the lights to cover us in darkness, and we covered Kit in tears and in song.

With the baby in bed and the covers tucked tight around the bodies of my children, I slip back under my covers. Kit's picture is next to my bed; I look at her face as often as I look at the faces of my other children, though hers is static, unchanging, beneath a blanket of time that I wish I could lift.

Renee Emerson
St. Charles, MO

Hagar and Ishmael, Jean-Charles Cazin, 1880

by Margaret Mackinnon

And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. (Gen. 21:14)

Those who know the story know God's voice
will soon arrive. Miraculous water will appear.
But in Cazin's vision of this afternoon, there's only

heaviness in the sky. The hint of a ruined moon
marks their yellow world, a landscape bleached,
unblessed. A patch of wild yucca made softer

only in the day's dim light. Even the evergreen
is distant, though the mother and her son
imagine they still hear a small bird there,

its song hovering both in and outside time.
There are so many ways to tell their tale—
the shame of it, the loss, their fear. And yes,

God's angel will be heard. The story turns—
but on these old and ordinary days, Hagar
can't imagine such an end to exile.

Still, there is not so much sorrow
that we can't see the boy who embraces her.
In Cazin's version of the story, it's an innocent son

who steadies her, his arms suddenly
wrapped around her waist—
and Hagar weeps with love for him.

Light and dark, dark and light.
Her hopeful boy holds his mother tight.
This child for whom she'd give her life

has saved her here—
the way my own child saved me, too.
So love kept me from drowning in our rainless air.

MARGARET MACKINNON's *most recent collection is* Afternoon in Cartago *(Ashland Poetry Press), which won the 2021 Richard Snyder Memorial Prize.*

Outside St. Peter's Basilica, a McDonald's serves Christ's poor.

Antechapel and rest house

by Sharon Christner

EARLY IN THE MORNING, when Pope Francis has just finished preparing his homily for the daily mass and the great doors of St. Peter's Basilica are poised to groan and be hauled open, the first congregants gather in the McDonald's just outside Vatican City.

At this time of morning the booths with outlets—prime real estate—fill quickly with middle-aged men wearing multiple coats. Before some of them must hurry out into the crowds and try to sell rosaries, umbrellas, power banks, tours, before others must go to hawk and fidget from behind tiny cart stands, before the remaining few sit on plastic crates and beg, they breathe in this time to sit and stretch their legs.

The Discalced Carmelites who come to Rome are not, despite their name, usually barefoot, but other zealous pilgrims and wanderers sometimes are, including one regular customer. He is asking for change this winter morning, from anyone who looks as though they might have change to offer. His tunic and coat drag on the ground, and so it is a grace that they were dark brown to begin with. He would like a *caffè*, and he makes his rounds among the plastic-cushioned booths.

On-duty Italian soldiers and off-duty Swiss Guards file in from time to time: this is the closest free bathroom to their post, and they are not going to pay to urinate in the city they are protecting. Like them, most people here this early in the morning are not buying food. There are few fries to fry. Nevertheless the empty fryer beeps periodically like the bells of some interplanetary chapel, keeping the time.

The McDonald's in the Borgo Pio neighborhood might be the closest thing St. Peter's has to an antechapel, used for pre-church warmth and arrangement and for post-church hanging about. Actual antechapels are rare in Italian churches, and there is no obvious place inside St. Peter's to prepare for, or rest after, whatever overwhelming encounter with the Divine happens there, so the comers and goers have naturally chosen the Golden Arches one block northeast to fill this role.

When the fryer beeps 11, a papal mass is underway in the basilica, and the McDonald's half fills with those who did not get a seat in Francis's presence. It is not a bad second choice, for though there is no supreme pontiff and no great cavernous hall, there is still a crowd, and therefore every tragedy and aspiration, every manner and principle of humanity that the pope could possibly address—and in addition, McToasts and Sweet Temptations. The displaced hopefuls leaving Vatican City are joined in the McDonald's by other, fresher

In 2016, a McDonald's franchise opened in the Borgo Pio neighborhood of Rome, just outside Vatican City. St. Peter's Square is seen in the background.

TIZIANA FABI / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

hopefuls stopping here before the basilica opens to the public again at noon.

When the mass ends and the flood of people is released from the bronze doors, the McDonald's fills at a rapid pace, and those who are sitting alone begin to yield their seats to families and migrate to smaller spaces and the tall stools in the corner. When the Model EU team from Florence leaves its tables, it is immediately replaced by a mass of pilgrims speaking Tagalog, which in turn is replaced by a wedding party, all but the bride. Now people sit with strangers; now they eat standing in front of the counter. It is seven to a booth, now eight. The double-coated men have long since gone.

This is an antechapel only with respect to its function, as a holding place relative to the mass. Having little physical or metaphysical in common with its referent, in all other respects it is more like an anti-chapel, a cosmic opposite of the basilica with which it shares most of its visitors. This McDonald's, however adapted to its prestigious surroundings, is still a McDonald's: young, fluorescent, low-ceilinged, glaring all over with advertisements for itself on ever-changing screens attached to tables, walls, and floors. All of the surfaces have a slight oily sheen that almost certainly has nothing to do with anointing. At any given time one of the ice cream machines is broken, and someone is unhappy about this. The noise of the place, by noon, could invade the innermost mind of the most serene Trappist.

But this establishment does have its own kind of decorum. On the south wall, a facade of ancient sandstone dotted with vines and pigeonholes has been screen-printed from floor to ceiling. Faux wood accents adorn the doorways and the trash can; there is a new and rather appealing McCafé pastry display. Nor is it without its celebrated figures: for 25 years Pope Benedict XVI, when he was the cardinal responsible for overseeing church orthodoxy, lived upstairs. His cardinal successor inhabits the apartment now, promoting and defending the doctrines of the Catholic faith while resisting the tempting smell of McNuggets wafting up from below. And the place does, to its credit, have more beautiful plastic chairs than the basilica does. But noise, crowding, and impatience are constant forces here, and the primary aromas are of grease and difficulty.

The basilica next door is all transcendence: the height of the dome, the richly patterned spotlessness, the angelic visitations, the swirling layers of time and mystery and incense, a place that would take a hundred people a thousand years to understand. This unaccountable place sings of the strangeness of the world: that otherworldly things are among

A papal mass is underway in the basilica, and the McDonald's half fills with those who did not get a seat. It is not a bad second choice.

us, that the receipts and protocols and kinds of hunger that saturate us all day long are not the founding principles of reality, that there really must be some kind of magic around that we have been ignoring but no longer can.

Before and between these encounters we need a place to sit, to take the pressure off of our backs and feet, to eat our requisite calories, or we might never see the glory of the glorious thing in the first place. So the basilica and the fast-food place, like the spirit and the body, thwart each other and make each other possible. In St. Peter's the people hear, though the nearest neighbors may be wrapped in their coats wading separately through the infinite floor, of the high call to love their neighbor as themselves. In the McDonald's they are close enough to their neighbor to know what he smells like.

There are other restaurants in the Borgo, of course, finer establishments that have subtler lighting, less crowding, and nothing of the sense of refuge and relief. Someone is watching all the time, and asking questions, and you are only allowed to sit there if you pay, and only for so long. The men who work at the tiny alleyway convenience stores packed from floor to ceiling with bruised fruit, the cashiers at the religious regalia shops full of bright bishops' cassocks and golden monstrances and life-size sculptures of Mary, the fellows hawking skip-the-line tours of the Sistine Chapel—all these, if they have not made some special agreement with a pizza seller, are likely to prefer the McDonald's. Even the pizza sellers sometimes sit in the McDonald's on their breaks.

In 2016, when it became known that this franchise would be coming to the shadow of St. Peter's, there were all the expected reactions: outrage, petitions, committees. Understandably, the proprietors of the smallest and cheapest of the pasta shops were concerned for their livelihoods. And understandably, residents cringed at the thought of the American behemoth edging in between the Renaissance architecture and the ancient cobbled streets. The cardinals who lived upstairs wrote angrily to Pope Francis, and a Committee for the Protection of the Borgo lamented this tragic fall of a neighborhood already suffering from such blights as minimarts and souvenir sales.

Cardinal Elio Sgreccia, president emeritus of the Pontifical Academy for Life, who did not live above the site, took particular grievance with it. "I repeat, the mega sandwich shop in Borgo Pio is a disgrace," he told reporters at the end of an interview in *La Repubblic*a. "It would rather be appropriate to use those spaces for activities in defense of the needy in the area, spaces of hospitality, shelter, and help for those who suffer, as the Holy Father teaches."

He spent most of the interview, however, discussing aesthetic concerns: such an "aberrant" choice breaks with culinary tradition, is "not in line with the aesthetics of the place" and serves "foods [he] would never eat." If the cardinal had been asked to choose between a refined Italian restaurant which fed refined food to refined tastes and an eyesore which gave shelter to the poor, he might have been hard-pressed to answer.

The McDonald's may in fact be one of the most helpful places for giving "hospitality, shelter, and help" to the worn-out traveler or the itinerant person, especially those who would rather not feel so keenly as though they are being helped.

First, and most evidently: it has cheap food. Miraculously, there are still a few things you can get for a euro. Second: the place is well insulated and temperature controlled, which means reliable relief from the summer heat and the winter

cold. Third: restrooms, unlocked. This provides both the obvious kind of relief and the benefit of free water from the sink, though warm and iron tasting. Fourth: there's Wi-Fi, not fast but free, and outlets. Fifth: no one is looking at you, not really. This differentiates it from the kind of explicitly charitable place that may provide great care but which has very little in the way of anonymity. There is no screening process, no stern interview at the door. McDonald's is trying to get people in, not out. Sixth: it is open every day, without fail, from 7 a.m. to at least midnight, covering the whole period of the day when the shelters and hostels are closed and then some.

Last, and most importantly: you can sit inside without having bought anything. Say what you will about McDonald's—its origins, its corporate structure, its garish American ubiquity, its food. But those locations that, under merciful management, allow people to sit without a receipt are all over the world places of special shelter and refuge and in this way do a great service to humankind. Besides all this, to answer the late cardinal, the restaurant pays the Holy See 30,000 euros each month, a sum that could fund several shelters, to provide these basic needs to the poor and pilgrim.

This McDonald's continues in the tradition of medieval rest houses, where a millennium ago pilgrims could stop, between seeing holy sites and adding to their collections of shiny pilgrimage pins, to eat and rest. Pope Leo III built a rest house near here around the year 800, a house "of wonderful size," according to the *Liber Pontificalis*, complete with fine decorations, dining couches, and a bath. A poor pilgrim could find a fast meal at a *diaconia*, a type of serving house adapted from the ancient food distribution services of Egyptian monasteries. All had the same general name and mission, and all were appointed by the pope, but each was separately managed and owned its own property, more independent and haphazard than a franchise system but to similar effect. Five of them were established in the Borgo, primarily working to provide pilgrims and the poor in the vicinity of the basilica with food and occasionally a bed. A supplicant to St. Peter or a homeless Roman might more reliably find shelter at one of at least three xenodochia in the neighborhood, places for receiving strangers. They were places of unusual amalgamations of people: St. Cummian wrote that some visiting Irish priests were surprised to find themselves packed into a xenodochium with "a Greek, an Egyptian, a Hebrew and a Scythian."

The lines blurred between the food and shelter services because everyone always needs both. The lines blurred, too, between the kinds of people who came. The *Liber Pontificalis* often refers to them together: "poor and pilgrims" or "Christ's poor," a phrase that indicates both groups. The local poor and the weary visitors from far-flung places were considered in the same category. Today's traveler-pilgrims might think themselves quite different from the local people experiencing poverty, but looking at their most pressing motivations, the old comparisons still hold.

At the peak of the post-mass rush at the McDonald's of Borgo Pio, whole families are sitting outside on the low window ledges. In terms of dirt and cigarette ash and the possibility of insects, it is equivalent to sitting on the sidewalk, but people are keen to differentiate themselves from other sidewalk sitters. When the ledges are full, the multitudes of McDiners spill out into the Piazza della Città Leonina, carrying their spotted paper bags. They gravitate toward the low wall that runs through the center of the plaza, because it feels more dignified than sitting on the ground, even though seagulls perch on this wall specifically to relieve themselves.

Back inside, three young women in office wear leave their trays of McChicken wrappers behind. A barefoot man appears out of his slow wandering and sits to investigate, crinkling through the white-and-yellow papers with his hands in search of a crescent of leftover sandwich. They come up empty. He could use something to eat. But for now he leans back and allows the finished tray to justify his sitting there, to signal that he's a paying customer—as if the workers have not, despite their own exhaustion, noticed him. They do not tell him to leave. Other diners—the ones who forget they are in an antechapel and a rest house—sometimes do tell him to leave, grimacing at his difficult aroma. But moments ago, sitting on the wall among the droppings, their own hope was the same: to get a place at the table, inside, where warmth and cushions are, because they have all been walking from place to place and carrying their things with them all day, wondering at the world but really looking for relief. ❑

SHARON CHRISTNER *is a graduate student at Harvard Divinity School. She is writing a collection of portraits of Rome.*

The Jewish Kabbalah tradition offers a way of understanding God in the world—one that has profoundly influenced Christianity.

The tree of God's mysteries

by Mordechai Beck

THE PATRIARCH ABRAHAM not only introduced monotheism to the world but also proposed the concept of an invisible deity. Abraham's God was beyond anything that the ancient world could imagine: this God could not be bribed nor inveigled to do something against God's will. This God was both all-powerful and totally humble. How, then, was an individual supposed to relate to God? How could humanity visualize the invisible?

The Jewish tradition had a further problem. One of the Ten Commandments forbids making a graven image. Though aimed mainly at the idolatrous practice of creating objects of worship, the commandment was taken more generally as a ban on any visual expression of the Divine. All suggestions of what constituted the Divine had to be verbalized, which is what the tradition of the oral law—or Torah shel b'al Peh, as opposed to the written law, Torah shel-bichtav—does in spades.

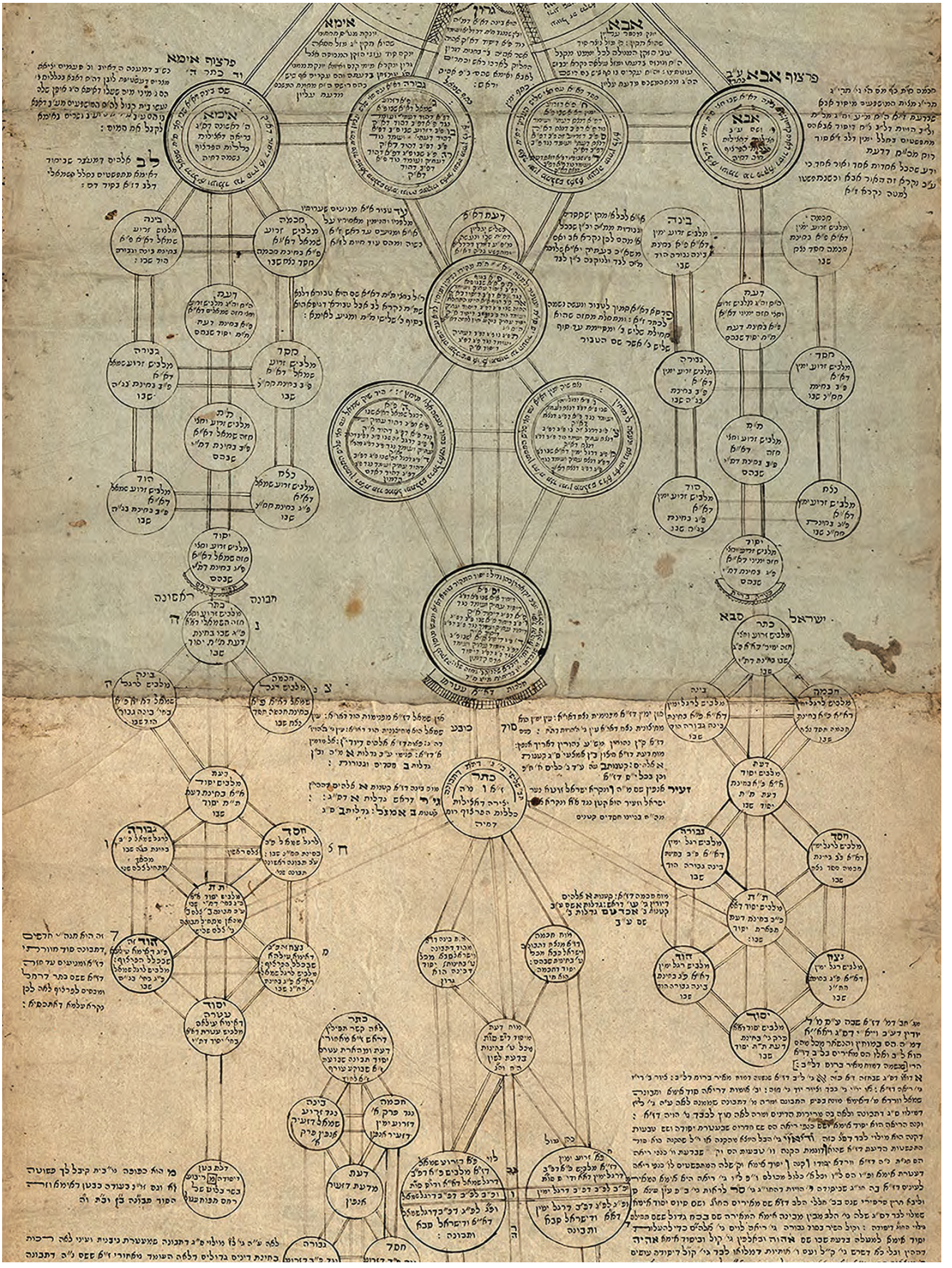
Yet even this did not satisfy everyone, and in the 12th and 13th centuries, a new concept took hold in the Jewish rabbinical tradition: Kabbalah. The word literally means "receiving," indicating that Kabbalah was an ongoing tradition received by the rabbinic elite, which in turn could share it with a select few acolytes. Kabbalah arose as an attempt to define the indefinable—the Ein Sof, the unending, or infinite, presence of God. God's immanence could be intuited through *sefirot*. This Hebrew word contains a number of associations, including story, a thing written, a sapphire, and also sphere. In kabbalistic circles, these sefirot were graphically depicted as fruit hanging on a tree.

Kabbalah offered the graphic representation of a tree as a way of understanding the Divine in the world. The kabbalistic tree, *ilan sefirot*, is the subject of a new study by J. H. Chajes, a professor of Jewish thought at the University of Haifa. At 440 pages, *The Kabbalistic Tree* is not an easy read, but it is a fascinating, in-depth look at this unique dimension of Jewish thought—including its profound overlap with medieval and Renaissance Christianity. Chajes's book is bound to become a classic, not just because it is the first and most comprehensive survey of the history and development of kabbalistic trees but also because its attention to detail, both graphic and written, makes it an invaluable tool for further research and discoveries in this often neglected area of Jewish thought.

In Kabbalah, the different fruits of the sefirotic tree are the visible aspects of the Divine, while the tree's underground roots represent the hidden aspect of God, the Ein Sof. The aim of the tree was not only to distinguish the visible from that which was not visible but to share the experience of the Divine. You can't see God in the sefirotic tree, but you can experience God's presence.

It took some time for this *ilan*, or tree, to take its ultimate shape, consisting of ten linked circles—the sefirot—arranged vertically from the top of the tree. Through each sefira God's attributes are revealed. Beginning from

Tree of Holiness, (detail), Eastern Europe, ca. 1700



You can't see God in the sefirotic tree, but you can experience God's presence.

the top of the tree, they are *keter* (crown) or *chochma* (wisdom), *bina* (understanding or explication), *da'at* (applied knowledge), *chesed* (love or compassion), *gevurah* (strength or power), tiferet (beauty), *Nezach* (Endurance), *Hod* (Majesty), *Yesod* (foundation), and *Malchiut* (majesty).

The "trees of Kabbalah," as the drawings came to be known, were often elaborations on the basic design of the sefirotic tree, with extensive commentary in writing explaining the sefirot and the relations between them. The diagrammatic trees often contained circles into which a particular emanation appeared (loving kindness, strict justice, beauty), making the sefirot distinct from one another even though they were ultimately connected. Some had a dark patch over the whole or a part of the circle, indicating that this was the territory of Ein Sof, the essence of God, into which it was impossible for mortal man to enter.

"These ten sefirot were considered the key to unlock the most profound secrets in nature and scriptures," writes Chajes. The kabbalists thought of themselves as men of science "engaged in the pursuit of *hokhmat ha-nistar*, the occult science," a pursuit "long validated by Europe's leading scientists, as the sustained attention of European savants from Marsilio Ficino to Isaac Newton to this 'divine science' amply demonstrates." Borrowing language from science—as even the early kabbalists did—he writes, "The sefirot tree is the double helix of Kabbalah."

Chajes emphasizes the overlapping of Jewish and Christian interests in the sciences and in the influence of the ilan sefirot on Christian thought throughout history. He notes that *Oration on the Dignity of Man*—Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's "manifesto of the Renaissance" from 1486—"is suffused with Kabbalah." Pico della Mirandola was one of the Christian intellectuals of the era who took great interest in the subject, studying it privately with rabbis and engaging the services of Jewish converts to Christianity to gather, translate, and teach kabbalistic sources. Moreover, according to Chajes, "Renaissance *ilanot* (trees) . . . are the products of Jews (and Christians) who shared a common conviction that the Kabbalah was the most ancient and sublime expression of philosophical and magical esotericism."

Chajes notes that in Renaissance Italy, non-Jewish elites—not just wealthy Jews—were eager to acquire kabbalistic trees. He cites a letter from a Florentine Jew named Benedetto Blanis to his patron Don Giovanni de' Medici, which likely refers to a kabbalistic tree known as the Magnificent Parchment:

> I am delighted to have so important a "Tree of Kabbalah" here in Florence brought from Lippilano at my request. I am having it copied on vellum with great diligence, so it will not be inferior to the original in any way but even better. I hope that this Tree will please Your Most Illustrious Excellency and that we will be able to enjoy it together.

"Blanis understood the value of the Magnificent Parchment," writes Chajes, "even to a Christian of Don Giovanni's stature."

But not every connection between Jews and Christians was so friendly. The story of Jacob Zemach (1578–1667) is a case in point. Brought up in Portugal, Zemach was both a physician and a rabbi who had absorbed much in the way of humanist education. It is possible that he was a converso—forcibly converted during the Portuguese Inquisition—and was one of the many *conversos* students and faculty when he studied at a Portuguese university. At one point he fled Portugal for the land of Israel, where he wrote, among other tracts, *Tiferet Adam (The Beauty of Adam)*. Chajes writes that this was "the only work to mention gentile authors and works, even if his references are disparaging." He goes on:

> Zemach spoke as one whose familiarity with gentile corpora had bred ambivalence if not contempt. . . . He used the great books of the non-Jewish humanists to demonstrate that the origins of esoteric knowledge are prophetic and therefore known exclusively to the Jews. Whatever true secrets [these books] hold are merely the vestigial remains of our own, he writes, invariably intermingled with spurious accretions. Zemach had become a missionary to his fellow *conversos*. His mission, however, was to lead them away from the literature that he and they knew well, and could not but admire, to the fuller truth of the Torah. By highlighting the gentile appropriations of Jewish secrets, Zemach simultaneously validated their kernel of truth and their dependence on the authentic uncorrupted tradition of the Jews.

Despite all his hesitations, Zemach related positively to Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno's *On the Shadows of Ideas*.

J. H. Chajes, Jewish cultural historian and author of *The Kabbalistic Tree*

He felt that Bruno had rediscovered the truth that had been lost to the Jewish people. Bruno's martyrdom in Rome in 1600 may well have consolidated Zemach's conviction that *On the Shadows of Ideas* was, at the very least, a shadow of the Torah.

In the Jewish world, the development of Kabbalah went through a major change with Isaac Luria, the Ari (Lion) of Safed (1534–1572), a rabbi who taught a far more complex system of sefirot. His teachings became the new standard of the dissemination of Kabbalah, which brought a new wave of kabbalistic trees. At this point, the work of Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1636–1689), a Lutheran, also became significant for Jews. "He pursued his studies without the Christological readings and conversionist agendas of earlier generations of Christian kabbalists," writes Chajes. "His book *Kabbalah Denudata* (*The Kabbalah Unveiled*) provided Christians with the tools and the texts Knorr thought necessary to embark on the study of Jewish Kabbalah."

Included in the book are some of the kabbalistic trees based on Luria's new Kabbalah, one of which was designed by Knorr himself. "It would have no place in this present book," Chajes explains, "had it not subsequently been appropriated by Jewish kabbalists for use as an opening component in the modular ilanot (trees) explored below." In other words, Jewish kabbalists found the Christian Knorr model relevant for their own purposes.

Knorr was not the only 17th-century Christian to be drawn into the Jewish sphere. Chajes relates that "two Jewish doctors and teachers of Hebrew presented Frederick William—the 'great elector' known for his tolerance of Catholics and Jews despite his strict Calvinist beliefs—with their *ilan*." The gift was meant to signal that the "newcomers had arrived as representatives of a people and culture with something to offer the local community of scholars."

The first volume of Knorr's *Kabbala Denudata* ends with the triumph of the Messiah, quoting Romans 16:27, which would have assured Knorr's critics that he was a pious Christian. Nevertheless, Chajes speculates that hidden in the ellipse in which he quotes Isaiah 25:8 ("The sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces and will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth") is the implicit subtext of Knorr's entire project: the end of the reproach of the Jews. The choice of a verse that highlights the end of this universal reproach as constitutive of the messianic era could not have been accidental. It was the thoughtful, if slightly veiled, statement of a scholar at once occultist and antiquarian, enlightened and messianic.

Hebrew scholar Isaac Baer Levinsohn (1788–1860) saw a copy of *Kabbala Denudata* for sale at a local fair in Berdychiv in Eastern Europe. It was printed in both Aramaic and Latin, complete with the five Kabbalah trees, including the one designed by Knorr himself, according to his understanding of Rabbi Luria's Kabbalah. In this way, the Jews of early 18th-century Eastern Europe discovered Knorr's work. Moreover, Knorr aimed to provide learned Christians with the keys to this ancient wisdom, keys that dangle from the wrist of Lady Wisdom on the frontispiece engraving.

Chajes has much more to say on the development of kabbalistic trees in his exhaustive study, including the proliferation of the trees in Jewish culture. He points to miniature trees used as amulets and to an Israeli political party that used the image of a sefirotic tree on its election flyers. He also references modern artists' own colorful interpretation of these trees. The image has become familiar in the culture, but it is, nonetheless, not well understood. As the late Jerusalem rabbi Chaim Lifshitz observed: "When elevated ideas are brought down to the street level, they lose their meaning." Many rabbinic authorities once thought of these trees as dangerous—and certainly not for the general public. Instead, they believed the trees should be reserved for an elite group of kabbalists to study and contemplate. But the Hasidic movement of the 17th century onward utilized these trees as a way of bringing esoteric concepts closer to their mass following, using these images to enhance their own joyous forms of worship. ❑

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COURTESY PHOTO VIA PENN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS

I like to think Jesus gives the blind man in Mark 8 vision of another kind: to see past the limits of human sight.

My double vision

by Rachel Hoskins

THE FIRST TIME I SAW DOUBLE is beyond my recollection. "Her left eye is too strong," a doctor told my parents when I was four years old. "It's blinding her right. It has to be corrected." He called my condition *strabismus*, something like a crossed eye. You've likely seen it: the eye turns out or in. Mine turned up and to the left. To correct it required surgery. Making a small incision in the conjunctiva of my bulb, the ophthalmologist reached the offending muscle and partially detached it. After surgery, I wore a patch like a pirate and my vision blurred for days. When it cleared, instead of a world split in two, I saw one.

Vision is a highly complex sense. The mechanical and neurological components of the eyes and brain work together to produce sight in a delicate dance of light absorption and translation from rods and cones. When the eyes do not align, the brain may prefer data from one eye over the other. Usually, favor goes to the "clear eye," the one without deviation, and my case was no exception. If left unchecked, my visual cortex would eventually ignore information from my other eye altogether, in a sense blinding it. Blinding it by ignoring its sight.

All this may be why my favorite healing act of Jesus involves the restoration of vision. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus travels to the village of Bethsaida, where villagers entreat him to heal their friend, who is blind. In other healing stories, Jesus speaks regeneration into being, but in this passage he physically intervenes, like an ancient medical doctor carefully operating on a little girl. First, he applies saliva. Then, he covers the man's eyes with his hands. Then he asks, "Can you see anything?" (8:23).

"I can see people, but they look like trees, walking" (8:24), the man says, a strange response for sure. So, Jesus places his hands over the man's eyes a second time. Many readers have been fascinated by this tale of healing in two acts. Some posit that Jesus engages in something like a first round of partial restoration that requires a second round of miraculous power. Others suggest that when Jesus first removes his hands, the man's visual cortex lacks the ability to translate images harvested from light. Or as Immanuel Kant might put it, he has perception but no concepts to make sense of what he perceives; he is merely seeing abstractions.

Either interpretation may be right. But I like to think that Jesus is up to something else. Rather than partial healing or abstracted perception, I like to think Jesus gives the man vision of another kind: to see past the limits of human sight.

The second time I saw double, I was 12 years old. In church, staring at the pulpit, I saw our pastor split. He duplicated like film exposed twice, layered and skewed. This time, the fragmentation stunned me. It was ongoing, and I was cognizant. Rationalizing with my middle school understanding of biology, I reasoned: *Two eyes, two images, right?* Calmed, I experimented with this newfound ability. Shifting my gaze, tilting my head, I sought maximum division, the most double of double views. But seeing clearly, integrating images into one, required a different kind of adjustment. Back in the ophthalmologist's office, the doctor said the severed muscle had grown back. My vision had regenerated.

At home after another surgery, again wearing a pirate's patch, I felt a deep pain throb through the adjusted socket. When I tried to see with my good eye, the pain permeated it too. They both ached in a hollow emptiness, as if the doctor had not just severed a muscle but had gouged them both out. It felt best to keep them both shut. I remember wondering if, along with the muscle, the doctor had severed my strength, like Samson and his hair.

My double vision had seemed like a gift, like accessing another sublime plane, where maybe people did move like trees walking. Yet, reasonable thinkers would disagree. For Kant and most of us after him, there is no other reality. There is the real as we perceive it—the phenomenal—and there is the "real reality" behind it, the noumenal. They are both essentially the same mundane place, but the noumenal, for the most part, is beyond our reach, because the world as we perceive it is interpreted through the self. It's as if we are wearing human-tinted glasses. Just as we cannot transcend the self to access "real reality," Kant argues in *Critique of Practical Reason*, so also we cannot access God. There are limits to human understanding.

But that does not mean we cannot conceive of an infinitude or limitlessness beyond us. We can. Confronted by cascading mountains, immeasurable stars, and even the immensity of mathematical equations, we may find ourselves overpowered by their vastness. This is what Kant calls the sublime. Our vision to conceive of infinity awes us. We humans are free to reason, and reason greatly. Additionally, that freedom gives us the ability to make moral choices. We can achieve mastery to some extent, allowing us to raise ourselves "altogether above the sensible world," writes Kant. But we are still hemmed in by the self. We see, but our vision is limited.

While Kant later expands his notion of human understanding, I believe he does not go far enough to account for self-interest. Driven by status and consumption, organizing for efficiency, and distracted by technology, pleasure, profit, and power, we often choose not what is moral or reasonable but rather what is right in front of us. Unable to grasp the repercussions of our actions and lifestyles on the planet and its people, we regard the world as an object for our purposes. When we see in this way, we reduce reality to its material pieces and parts. We merely harvest light with rods and cones. As one eye becomes stronger, the other eye, so to speak—our spiritual vision—becomes weaker.

Some thinkers have pushed back on Kant's thinking. Friedrich Schleiermacher, often called the founder of modern Protestant theology, is one such figure. While he reframes theology to align with Enlightenment thought, he does not agree with Kant that our ability to understand reality is rooted in, or limited to, the reasoning self. Instead, Schleiermacher forwards a surprising claim: rather than being able to conceive of infinite reality using your rational abilities, that reality comprehends *you*. Thinking that we can grasp what is immeasurably greater than us is like

SOURCE IMAGES: BILLY PASCO AND JOHANNES KRUPINSKI ON UNSPLASH

I was 12 years old. Staring at the pulpit, I saw our pastor duplicate like film exposed twice, layered and skewed.

Prometheus taking fire from the gods, he writes in *On Religion*. Each person is only one small member of an immense universe. And none of us, no matter how independent, reasonable, or moral, is sufficient on our own or entirely free. We depend on our planet and on other people, and they depend on us. But as creatures, we are absolutely dependent for our existence on God.

The realization of our absolute dependence is an immediate perception, and it overwhelms us. What I find most fascinating is that Schleiermacher believes this experience of being overwhelmed is intuitive—as in, prerational. In other words, when you experience it, you will not revel in your powers of reason. You will wonder where they have gone. You will find yourself speechless. You may even forget yourself—and God willing, you will, because there are no frameworks or conceptual categories, Kantian or otherwise, for understanding what you have just encountered.

Like the man from Bethsaida who meets Jesus for the first time and sees people like trees walking, you will not be able to make sense of it. But it will make sense of you and your place in this world, and that feeling will free you and raise you altogether above a self-limiting view. You "will see miracles everywhere," Schleiermacher writes, not just in cascading mountains and starry skies, but in every humble and overlooked speck of sand, drop of water, and blade of grass.

With this move, Schleiermacher unseats our egotism, replacing the self at the center with the Divine imprinting all things. This vision of the world aligns well with an incarnational view. The revelation of God descends and opens both of our eyes, in a manner of speaking—mundane and transcendent, material and spiritual. And it infuses reality with the same.

Seeing in this way abounds with ethical implications for our planet and ourselves. Instead of valuing a forest as, say, a place for outdoor adventure, a crop of two-by-fours, or a future business park, we value it for what it is: a home to flora and fauna, a grace-filled sacrament. No longer reduced to its material pieces and parts, the universe is revealed as a sanctum that is, in the language of Genesis, "very good" (1:31). Cascading mountains, immeasurable stars, and even the infinitude of mathematical equations point not to the glories of our own reasoning capacities or to our mastery and domination of the world but rather to the glory of God, as does every humble and overlooked speck of sand, drop of water, and blade of grass.

Yet, there is another danger here. Focusing on the spiritual becomes problematic if we ignore the material. Living in perpetual divine heights ignores the other eye. It too limits our view. We need both spiritual and material vision, not one ignored for the other, or a split and doubled view. We need integration.

And even if it were possible to live on such a transcendent spiritual plane, who could do so continuously? Who could unendingly see with the eyes of God, as it were, and not become unmoored? Without Kant's human-shaded glasses, reality would shift from the spectrum of human understanding to something like ultraviolet light. Nothing would make sense. Among the banalities of eating, sleeping, playing, working, and even caring for others, who could function as a material creature while the immaterial heavens tore open around them? It would disorient us, I think, like having vision with no vision.

If this is the gift Jesus gives the man from Bethsaida on his first round of healing that day, it is one he soon corrects. He does not leave the man to such an ongoing fate, no matter how profound and revelatory the view. Instead, Jesus places his hands over the man's eyes a second time, and when he removes them, the man's sight is restored. "He saw everything clearly," says Mark (8:25).

The Greek word τηλαυγῶς, translated "clearly," can also be thought of as "seeing plainly." Instead of splitting the world in two, I like to think Jesus integrates the man's vision, giving him the plain sight to live as a creaturely, sense-experiencing being. The gospel writer tells us that after restoring his sight, Jesus sends him home. While Mark does not tell us more, I like to imagine the man spends his days marveling at each prismatic drop of water, veined leaf, and starry sky as though infused with infinity and set on fire. But I wonder if sometimes he still dreams of people like trees walking and ponders a gift that once was his.

If that is the case, then I can relate to this man from Bethsaida who has his plain sight restored. That day in church when my vision split, not only did the pastor double but the entire sanctuary fractured. Pews, curtains, crosses, choir, baptismal, and altar reproduced. Light fragmented in a million sparks of refracted lumens as movement headed into the aisles. People grew long limbs, sprouted and ruptured, swept along by graceful and jagged currents. And I joined too. Down I went toward those staggering figures, those points of light. The room filled. My heart and retinas swung open, as the ceiling released and that which I knew not and yet knew as plainly as I knew myself descended. And for a moment I saw clearly a world valued as good, as very good. For a moment I saw past the limits of human sight. ❑

RACHEL HOSKINS, *a recent graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary, studies patristic theology at the University of Oxford.*

Blood Memory

by Charles Hughes

A field where nothing grows appeared to me—
A onetime dream, so far, not long ago—
Much as you see in pictures: no man's land.
Nowhere I've been in waking life, although
I seem to know this place; I'm running here,
The path I'm running on bordering trenches
And craters, interweaving scorched remains
Of trees, from time to time bypassing rubble,
Once lived-in rubble, house, barn, church, its cross
On top but sideways like a fallen arrow.
Unhurt, unhurried, I'm (I sense this) meant
To be here, running at this jogging pace
In the direction pointed by the cross.
The evil thing still happening here must be
The why of it, this running here, alone.

Thunder far off? Explosions. Intermittent,
Persistent clatter—of?—machine-gun fire.
Louder and louder as I run. White flashes
Nibbling away the dead gray sky ahead;
Their fleeting shapes recalling cut white flowers
Left on a grave to fade to next to nothing.
The darkness has not overcome the light,
I'm saying, praying—running faster—when,
As if God's providence has run amok,
Bursting white flashes, now bright rain, consume
The sky, then the booming shaking wakes me up
Before the peace, before I've heard my name.

CHARLES HUGHES'*s most recent poetry collection is* The Evening Sky *(Wiseblood).*

The goodness of a Taylor Swift show points to our need for a deeper goodness.

Worshiping at the church of Taylor

by Amy Julia Becker

TAYLOR SWIFT MORE OR LESS PLAYS on repeat when I'm driving around with our kids, so the recent arrival of *The Eras Tour* film, a new version of "Cruel Summer," and *1989* (*Taylor's Version*) all generated great excitement in our household. I'm a fan, but I'm also trying to understand. Why, exactly, is Taylor Swift so popular?

I asked the six teenagers in our minivan this question before we dropped them off to enjoy the *Eras* movie. (My husband, Peter, and I went for a walk. Our family had the concert experience of a lifetime back in May, and I had no need to relive it.)

The kids said they love Taylor because she's authentic, creative, relatable. That she cares about how she is seen by others but doesn't care enough to back down from what she really believes. She seems very real. Taffy Brodesser-Akner offered a different take in the *New York Times*, which is that Swift allows girls and women to experience every era of their lives without cringing. She helps us receive the sad and embarrassing and romantic and immature and sincere moments all as a part of what makes us who we are, and therefore worthy of remembering and celebrating.

All of these answers make sense to me. And yet there is also an undercurrent—or perhaps an overcurrent—of adulation, one that at first seems incongruous with the aw-shucks, relatable, every-girl Taylor.

Our family walked into Gillette Stadium in Massachusetts last spring for one of the most memorable shows of the Eras Tour. As fate would have it, we had procured tickets to one of Taylor's legendary "rain shows." For the uninitiated, as I was, it is desirable to see Taylor Swift perform in the rain, because she refuses to let the elements get in the way of the entertainment. Somehow she made us all feel—all 70,000 of us—that we were hanging out with her as she showed us a few things she'd been working on. In a torrential downpour. Rain can't stop her from dancing, and it can't stop her fans from celebrating.

As soon as we arrived at the show, Peter and I were both struck by the sense of being in a house of worship. The rituals, the chants, the ecstatic moments, the shared experience, even the reciprocal relationships established through friendship bracelets—it all underscored a sense of awe and transcendence alongside intimacy. People are notably kind to one another at a Taylor Swift show. At Gillette Stadium, even the security guards were smiling widely and dancing in the aisles. Because our oldest daughter has Down syndrome, we were able to stand throughout the show in a section specifically set aside for people with disabilities. It felt

Taylor Swift performs in May 2023 during the Eras Tour at Lincoln Financial Field in Philadelphia.

LISA LAKE / TAS23 / GETTY IMAGES

The church of Taylor is a church of the circumference. There's nothing wrong with that. And yet we can get stuck there.

holy to stand among other disabled people, watching sign language interpreters and dancing alongside a woman in a wheelchair. The title of Jessica Winter's recent piece for the *New Yorker* sums it up well: "Bearing Witness with My Daughter at the Church of Taylor Swift."

Among the many celebrities our kids could try to emulate, I'm glad they have turned to Swift. She seems to care about people. She seems honest in the way she portrays herself. She writes compelling lyrics about betrayal and heartache and awkwardness and hurt.

And yet I also suspect that even this billionaire, multi-Grammy-winning superstar herself cannot satisfy my children's deepest longings. As sincere as she might be, Taylor Swift is also a pop star. By definition, her job is to keep our longings on the surface and satisfy them there.

In *Everything Belongs*, Richard Rohr writes about the dangers of living too much on the surface of our existence. "We are a circumference people, with little access to the center," he writes. "We live on the boundaries of our own lives . . . confusing edges with essence, too quickly claiming the superficial as substance." Rohr goes on to explain that the circumferences of our lives aren't in and of themselves bad. We don't need to moralize and stand in judgment of them. And yet if we stay at the circumferences, we get stuck there, and we never encounter the deeper realities of suffering and joy and pain and love.

The church of Taylor is a church of the circumference. Rohr describes the circumference as "passing, accidental, sometimes illusory." Necessitating a trip to Party City or an order of plastic rhinestone stickers from Amazon to participate. Creating a sense of connection that dissipates as soon as the fireworks end. There's a part of me that wants to reject Rohr's advice and moralize about the consumerism and ephemerality of it all. There's another part of me that wants to critique our churches for not offering more of a sense of understanding and intimacy to teenagers and adults alike.

And there's a part of me that wonders whether the church of Taylor Swift could be a way station for my kids' generation. Swift's concerts offer a place where we can tap into deep human longings for both transcendence and intimacy, for celebration of our glorious selves and absolution of our worst parts, for belonging to one another across all sorts of divides.

The goodness of a Taylor Swift show points to our need for a deeper goodness. We are a lonely people in need of connection that goes deeper than friendship bracelets exchanged with strangers. We are a people in need of permission to mourn losses and celebrate beauty for longer than a few hours on a Saturday night. We are taught—by our culture, and also by Swift herself—to believe in karma, but we are in need of blessing. Our souls crave the assurance that we will not be measured by our rights and wrongs but instead will be received in love by a God of grace.

The church has not been able to compete with Taylor Swift. But maybe, once the tour is over and the music fades, some of those people will find their way to a smaller and quieter setting with the same invitation to friendship and belonging and intimate connection. Maybe Swift is just one more step on a road away from sanctuaries of grace. Or maybe she is a sign that points to our need for them. ❑

AMY JULIA BECKER *is author of* To Be Made Well: An Invitation to Wholeness, Healing, and Hope.

Gideons

by Marjorie Maddox

All those small, green New Testaments
or silver-inscribed blue Bibles—over

2 billion given away in 95+ languages—
handed out to hesitant university students

("Thanks, I already have one," you once
tried to explain) or gifted to prisoners,

ninety-year-olds in nursing homes,
forty-somethings losing gallbladders,

or this free bestseller quietly placed
and prayed over in bedside table drawers

in hotels, motels, seaside inns where
the words on thin paper are ignored

or earnestly sought out, a life redirected here,
a soul dedicated there, or the entire book

burned with one flick of a lighter,
or a fireworks epiphany that the faux-

leather surface is A-OK for snorting cocaine
or paddling prostitutes, the mass-produced

pages soliciting anger, rebellion,
ecstasy, indifference, penitence, theft.

For volunteers, the rules are straightforward:
commercial salesman, member in good standing

of an evangelical church; willingness
to identify yourself with the Gideon

lapel button and speak your own journey.
As God said to Gideon, "Go with the strength

that you already have," even when,
like Moses, your mouth fills with pebbles,

even when you feel like just the neat version
of a Jesus Freak or a less doorbell-ringing

clone of Jehovah's Witness, you know
you must dig in deep for the courage

you don't have, a confidence that catches
on Do Not Disturb signs. But it's easy

enough, really, isn't it, to open
and close the drawer or drop off

the boxful of Good News and not really
say anything? No martyrdom required,

maybe just a joke or two at your expense,
but nothing Salem-style. So what if

someone tears page after page, or highlights
what she doesn't like in orange, or sits for hours

reading Revelation backwards and forwards
while soaking in a Historic Hotel USA tub

drinking gin, then tossing the holy
book out the tenth-floor window? "Do not

cast your pearls before swine," you learned
as a kid, but deep inside you know

even the squeaky-clean are snouted prodigals
smelling of anything but free-sample hotel

mouthwash and lotion. How can you complain?
It's all part of the job description for eternity

and much easier than that Right-Hand Apostle Peter
denying everything in front of an unruly rooster?

Even you must admit that your small actions
seem necessary but almost-cowardly behind the scenes,

the closed doors, the monogrammed shower curtains
you never pull back, never have to clean. Still,

each night you (inhale), open any hotel drawer (exhale)
sigh relief that the book is there. The book is always there.

MARJORIE MADDOX *has published 14 books of poetry, including* Begin with a Question *(Paraclete) and her ekphrastic collaboration,* Heart Speaks, Is Spoken For *(Shanti Arts).*

Raymond Roseliep quietly became one of the most highly regarded haiku poets in the English language.

The Iowa poet-priest who mastered haiku

by Robert Hirschfield

Mother, why is
Father dying on the cross
in our cornfield?

THE IMAGE STARTLES THE WAY MANY of Raymond Roseliep's images startle. His association between the figure and the cornfield underscores Ezra Pound's poetic dictum, "Make it new." As dark and as stark as that image is, a Roseliep haiku can also be unapologetically whimsical:

hole in my sock
letting spring
in

Roseliep was born in Farley, Iowa, in 1917 and died in 1983. A Catholic priest based in Dubuque, he was also one of the most highly regarded haiku poets in the English language.

A contemporary of poet-priests Daniel Berrigan and Thomas Merton, he lacked the attention they got. Haiku poets get less attention even than ordinary poets, if that's possible to imagine. And he was not a social activist like Berrigan or Merton. He did not make headlines for burning draft files or writing a best-selling memoir. His sedentary life as a priest in Iowa was more distancing even than being a hermit in Kentucky.

His link, as a priest, to poetry was classically spiritual: "When I look into the mirror of visible creation," he told poets Mark and Ruth Doty in an interview that appears in *A Roseliep Retrospective*, "I see the Invisible—the world is the overflow of God's mind—and however imperfectly, I make the things of earth and sky into poems. When I give back these gifts to Beauty's Self and Giver, you can say I'm offering sacrifice. The incarnation of the word, then, is the reincarnation of the Word."

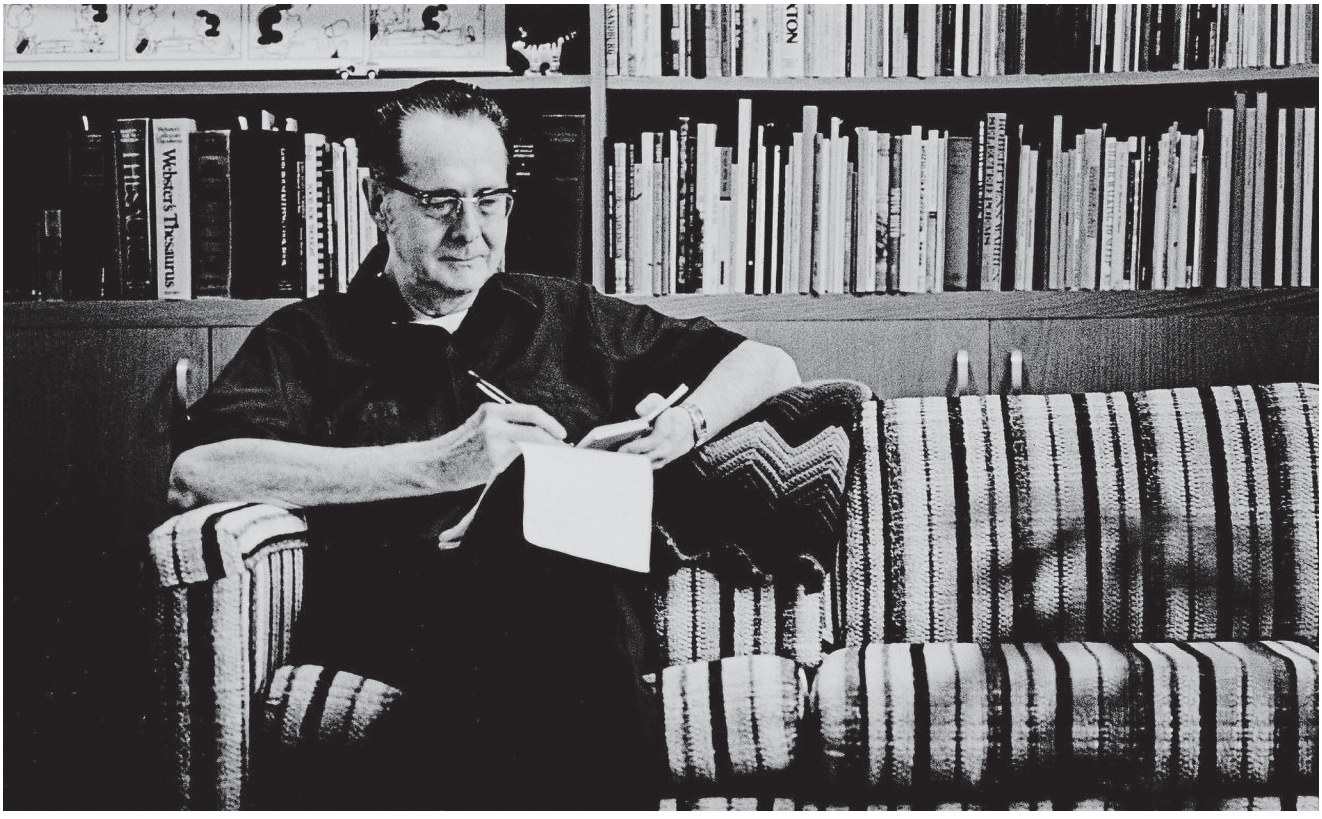
To many of his readers, Roseliep's priestly vocation was unknown. He signed his haiku simply Raymond Roseliep, and he didn't wear vestments for author photos.

In the early '70s, when his poems first began appearing in *Modern Haiku*, he informed its first editor, Kay Titus Mormino: "I do what I do deliberately—'breaking rules.'" Roseliep didn't begin writing haiku until he was in his 40s, when he had been a priest for years. He found another institution of rules. Haiku insists on concrete sense images, of which there are many in the priest's poetry. It emphasizes the object itself rather than any metaphoric potential the image has, and it marks time with *kigo*—seasonal references, the fulcrum of traditional haiku.

Roseliep joined forces with haiku but insisted on breaking its rules. He had difficulty separating himself from metaphor, and he belittled *kigo* as merely symbolic. He was not shy about airing out mystical imagery:

time
is what
is still

Poet and priest
Raymond Roseliep



He was criticized for this kind of move. In *The Modern English Haiku*, acclaimed haiku poet and editor George Swede commented: "Here is a haiku that fails to communicate because it involves abstract ideas rather than tangible things." From a Hindu or Buddhist mystical standpoint, *time* would perhaps be considered a gem. But from the haiku standpoint, the mystical is made up of tangible things cradled in empty space.

Other observers of Roseliep's work were not as dismissive of his use of the abstract. Lucien Stryk, renowned haiku translator and Zen scholar, said, "Roseliep would be appreciated as a fine haiku poet anywhere, especially in Japan. He's the American Issa." Haiku and long-form poet Colette Inez lauded Roseliep as "a natural resource of Iowa." Chuck Brickley, an associate editor at *Modern Haiku*, called Roseliep the "John Donne of Western haiku."

In her biography of her former teacher, Donna Bauerly begins with these words: "The central question for discovering Raymond Roseliep the man has always been simply 'who is he?'" Roseliep, as a person, was difficult to know. Along with maintaining strictly separate identities and safeguarding his mysteries, he assumed a haiku alter ego: Sobi-Shi, which like Roseliep means "rose lover." And he could be confrontational in approaching far more experienced and knowledgeable haiku poets and editors about haiku. One was the venerated *Modern Haiku* editor Robert Spiess, about whom he said in a letter to friend and fellow haiku poet Elizabeth Searle Lamb, "Robert must remember that I too have my own concept of what haiku is and what it isn't."

In the mid-1960s, Roseliep was humbled by a serious nervous breakdown that cost him his teaching post at Loras College in Dubuque. He spent the final 18 years of his life as chaplain to retired Franciscan sisters at Holy Family Hall in Dubuque. He became a vulnerable priest caring for vulnerable sisters, comforting them when they were sick and dying, as well as celebrating mass for them. It was work that would have resonated with Bashō, the 17th-century Zen monk who played a crucial role in haiku's development—some of his best haiku depict life elements reduced to their bare bones.

In their interview, Mark and Ruth Doty asked Roseliep what drew him to haiku. "Well I've always admired reduction, brevity, Greek Anthology terseness, Emily Dickinson's gnomic compression," he said. "And I like the asymmetry of the three lines, the challenge of getting the right thing in the right place. I was beginning to experiment with haiku in my second book, *The Small Rain*, and became more and more caught up in them."

Before Roseliep's turn to haiku, he was a long-form poet, with rolling cadences. His first volume, *The Linen Bands*, was published in 1961 and has echoes of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

Apocalypse is beautiful

by Steven Peterson

Apocalypse is beautiful
when seen from far away.
Our latest telescope retells
a distant disarray:

Two galaxies collide, one dies,
and yet we do not weep,
but say, "What colors! What design!"
and get a good night's sleep.

STEVEN PETERSON *is a poet and playwright living in Chicago.*

It would be poetry to open up
my store of feelings and play a prank
with them, by saying I was wholly drunk
as an apostle on a flowing cup
of recent grape, as James perhaps or Paul

It was not long, however, before Roseliep's spiritual poems were stripped bare as haiku—or nearly so, as in this poem titled "Priest, to Inquirer" (haiku are traditionally untitled):

This cassock whips my
legs through the four seasons so
I'll know who I am

"Flee," an early work, resembles the vertically experimental offerings of Christian mystic Robert Lax:

I
run
from
me;

Puff;

Step
out
of
(lord)

foot
step:
soled
souled

sold.

It's the poem of a man in spiritual flight from himself. A loose, alliterative ribbon of language that is visually like a stumble.

In 1976, Roseliep published his first haiku-only volume, *Flute over Walden*. The poet was almost 60. His path had progressed slowly over many years. In most of his previous volumes haiku was mixed in with his long-form poems, among them many sonnets. His themes ranged from spiritual outpourings to literary musings to amorous imaginings (for which he would sometimes feel the heat of his church superiors' disapproval):

waiting for my love.
the incurled
apple bud

Despite his range of subjects and his increasing attention to haiku, he was surely the most catholic of poets, catholic in the sense of "universal." He published in Catholic magazines like *America* and the *Tablet* (London) but also in esteemed literary journals like *Prairie Schooner* and *Beloit Poetry Journal*, as well as in the aforementioned *Modern Haiku*, pinnacle of haiku periodicals.

Roseliep's link to poetry was classically spiritual. But to many of his readers, his priestly vocation was unknown.

In his work, we find mention of literary luminaries such as William Faulkner, E. E. Cummings, Flannery O'Connor, Marianne Moore, and Ezra Pound. He embarked on correspondences with Cummings and Moore, and briefly with Merton, from whom he requested an autographed picture that never came.

Bauerly recalls, "There was a kind of satisfaction for him to be in touch with particularly famous writers as well as others." He also conducted lengthy correspondences with former students. One former student, Thomas J. Reiter, offered a critique of Roseliep's work in his very first letter, citing, among other things, his habit of literary name-dropping. Apparently miffed, Roseliep never responded to that letter, but he kept up a correspondence with Reiter that lasted until he died.

In a poem that appeared posthumously in *Modern Haiku*, the poet writes:

the child called
a wrong number:
we talked all spring.

The child could have been himself. When the Dotys asked Roseliep who he saw as his audience, he answered, "Anyone! Anyone who will love me, love my poem. Love me, oh definitely. And through my words, I am loving an unseen someone in turn."

Like Merton, Roseliep became more and more interested in Zen as he grew older. If Merton's big influence was Japanese scholar D. T. Suzuki, Roseliep's was Nobuo Hirasawa, his Japanese publisher and bestower of his haiku name. Roseliep took to heart Hirasawa's teaching of *mu*, which in Hirasawa's parlance boiled down to "nothing, none, empty," Zen's summation of the mysterious mulch of existence.

Integrating *mu* into his haiku led ultimately to his writing *The Still Point*, a weave of Zen and Catholicism that is perhaps the closest approximation of a spiritual self-portrait that we have of Roseliep.

In his introduction to the volume, he outlines its essence: "Like old Bashō's frog, we must keep plunging. Eastern and Western frogs do, of course, and not all of them make the same sound." The plunge of this particular frog into Zen-inspired haiku is exhilarating in part because it conforms to the poet's fascination with our quirky manhandling of the naturally sanctified:

tape
recording
mountain silence

His haiku depict oneness, the absence of self, the far journey from "love me" to the unshadowed entity beyond duality.

a frog to sit with
and not
say a word

Along this journey, there is a crossing point from Bashō's frog to the Eucharist. Roseliep returns to his home ground.

the Mass priest
holds up bread
the still point

holding bread
hands
are empty

Roseliep remained to the end a Catholic frog who made his own sound. ❑

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Books

"When it comes to *ahav*, there is no easy answer to the question 'What is love?'"

—Timothy Peoples, *page 81*

Discussed in this issue

Song-Mi Suzie Park's study of love in the Hebrew Bible

Lee C. Bollinger, **Geoffrey R. Stone**, and **Elizabeth Losh** on the challenges of digital democracy

John Swinton's lively examination of evil

Lucia Hulsether's exploration of capitalism's human costs

Jennifer Carlson's findings on the ideology of gun culture

Henry Grabar's call for upending our parking expectations

Keenan Norris's story of a father, a son, and a city

Paul Harding's fictional depiction of a failed Eden

In the Hebrew Bible, love is complex

Song-Mi Suzie Park shows that *ahav* is dense, powerful, political, and divine.

by Timothy Peoples

What is love? It's a simple question that writers and artists have asked repeatedly through the centuries, from Bernard of Clairvaux and Mildred Bangs Wynkoop to Tina Turner and Haddaway. It's also the question that biblical scholar Song-Mi Suzie Park explores in her excellent new book.

Often, we approach love, whether secularly or theologically, through the Greek concepts of *philia*, *eros*, *storge*, and *agape*. Some ministers anachronistically use those words to describe love in the Hebrew Bible; others mistakenly believe that *hesed* is the only Hebrew word for love in scripture. As a corrective, Park focuses on the verb *ahav* and its corresponding noun, *ahahav*, which appear nearly 250 times in the Hebrew Bible.

The etymology of *ahav* is unclear. The term is often used metaphorically, connecting individuals' specific backgrounds, emotions, and experiences with something that cannot be measured or diagrammed. Park writes: "Love, *ahav*, is depicted as a dense term and concept that has a web of associations, meanings, and connections—and it is this dense consortium of meanings that is evoked when *ahav* is used and appears in a particular narrative." Noting that *ahav* is associated with men far more than with women, Park describes it as a "divine, powerful, painful, mysterious, and ultimately feminine force that might be on par with God." In each chapter of the book, Park utilizes a different biblical narrative to define and shape our understanding of *ahav*.

She contextualizes *ahav* by focusing on the relationship between the Israelites and God in Deuteronomy. This relationship is based solely on the covenant God makes with Moses and the people of Israel after the exodus from Egypt. Park demonstrates that the Deuteronomic covenant has the same components as other Near Eastern treaties of that era: a preamble, stipulations, provisions, witnesses, and blessings and curses.

At first glance, such a covenant may seem more contractual than loving. But throughout the Bible's covenantal narrative, Park shows, *ahav* manifests as action and obedience. To love in this regard is to pledge allegiance and loyalty to God. Even when we think of love as an emotional concept, Park writes, we recognize that it is not based solely on feeling. She brings Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner into the conversation, noting his claim that emotions in Judaism "are not seen as spontaneous but as an aspect of a person's judgment." She quotes Neusner: "Our task as human beings demands that we sanctify our emotions as much as carry out actions of holiness."

Love in the Hebrew Bible

By Song-Mi Suzie Park (Westminster John Knox)

In the Hebrew Bible's narratives, Park shows, love is political, theological, familial, and social. She takes readers through various relationships, including Jacob and Esau, David and Saul, and David and Jonathan. Each of these relationships symbolizes a different type of love, thus adding another layer to the complexity of *ahav*. The hardest part of understanding how love operates in the Hebrew Bible, readers discover, is that it changes with every narrative.

Park highlights the complexity in the relationship between Jacob and Esau. The two are born into opposition, which shapes not only how they interact with one another but also how their parents interact with them. Each parent loves one son more than the other, demonstrating hierarchical love—and this hierarchy complicates how the characters understand love from God. Park identifies two kinds of love in this narrative: "Lofty, celestial love connected to God; and a baser, animal-like love centered on appetites and bodily desires. Through this juxtaposition, the story asserts the supremacy of the loftier kind of love by connecting it to God's preferences and plans."

Park deftly weaves together historical facts and myths, adding layers of cause and understanding to textual formation, particularly around the behaviors of the central figures. For example, when considering the opposition between Jacob and Esau, she notes that in Greco-Roman mythology, twins were associated with both animals and

divine beings. It was commonly thought that if a woman bore twins, she had been impregnated by two fathers: one human and the other a deity. This belief created the conditions for preferential treatment of the twin whose father was thought to be divine.

In the case of Saul and David, the narrative that defines love revolves around power and political play. While God appoints Saul to the throne in a mysterious way, it only happens after the Israelites' constant rejection of God as their sovereign. In the same mysterious way that Saul is appointed, he is then rejected by God and falls in love with the one who will usurp him. Park asserts that while love in this narrative is about power and politics, it is also about pain. What we see through God's mysterious actions in this story is a God who is pained after being rejected by the people. This heartbroken God allows individuals (such as Saul) to feel the same kind of painful love. "God might not just be a victimizer of love, but might also be its victim," Park writes.

David and Jonathan share yet a different type of love, although Park makes it clear that she's not highlighting the erotic dimensions of love that many have seen in David and Jonathan's relationship. Rather, she highlights a love that is complicated and ambiguous. David makes Saul's children fall deeply in love with him in order to create a bond greater than the bond between the children and Saul.

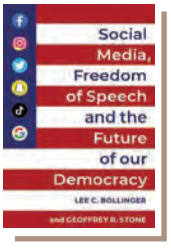
It is common for words in biblical Hebrew to carry multiple meanings. When it comes to *ahav*, there is no easy answer to the question "What is love?" (or to the related question "Who is love?"). Park shows how the biblical narratives suggest that love might be its own entity, perhaps even one that has authority over God. In the Hebrew Bible, Park demonstrates, love is "fraught and complicated." It is "neither one thing or another, but instead is irreducible, everchanging, mysterious, and ultimately unknowable." ❑

TIMOTHY PEOPLES *is senior pastor at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas.*

Can democracy survive social media?

Two new books offer critiques and solutions that aim to recalibrate digital politics toward the common good.

by Anna Floerke Scheid



Social Media, Freedom of Speech, and the Future of Our Democracy

Edited by Lee C. Bollinger and Geoffrey R. Stone (Oxford University Press)

Selfie Democracy: The New Digital Politics of Disruption and Insurrection

By Elizabeth Losh (MIT Press)

It is no secret that politics have gone digital. Most of us get at least some of our news about politics online, and many of us follow politicians on social media platforms. We may express our views by commenting on public officials' social media posts or tagging them in our own posts. Political activists circulate online petitions and organize rallies and protests through hashtags. Campaigns use social media to promote candidates and to recruit volunteers for canvassing, phone banking, and, more recently, text banking.

The internet can be a potent force for democracy, drawing more people into active citizenship, providing new avenues for amplifying their voices, and increasing their participation in the political systems that affect their lives. But the digitization of political life can also threaten democracy, a threat most palpably manifested in the January 6 attack on the US Capitol. *Social Media, Freedom of Speech, and the Future of Our Democracy* and *Selfie Democracy* are two recent books that aim to diagnose the ways that digitized democracy degrades American political institutions and to offer critiques and solutions that could recalibrate digital politics toward the common good.

Both books name and discuss an array of challenges wrought by our emergent era of digital democracy: the illusion of direct access to candidates and elected officials, the spread of fake news and disinformation campaigns, the effects of amoral algorithms designed to amplify content that keeps people glued to their screens regardless of the content's accuracy, and the ways social media algorithms influence people's worldviews and moral agency. Both books are worth reading for anyone concerned with how internet usage is reshaping our personal and collective identities, increasing political polarization, radicalizing Americans toward political violence, and eroding trust in democratic institutions.

Lee Bollinger and Geoffrey Stone deal primarily with the legal challenges that arise when addressing the individual and societal harm caused by social media. Bollinger, a legal scholar with particular expertise in the First Amendment, is president of Columbia University, and Stone is on the faculty of the University of Chicago Law School. The editors' expertise in American jurisprudence sets the focus of this edited

Our digitized politics—and their seemingly contradictory impacts on human agency—have developed over decades.

volume, which wrestles with how to navigate the American legal tradition of freedom of speech and expression in the relatively new digital contexts that have arisen through social media. Of the book's 31 contributors, 27 have degrees in law and either practice law, work as law school faculty, or currently serve or have served as elected officials. The volume is an excellent resource for those who want to get a handle on legal issues, particularly with regard to the First Amendment, that govern social media. For legal scholars or law students interested in the pressure that digitized democracy is putting on civil liberties, the book is a must-read.

The essays are also generally readable for a nonlawyer (like myself), though they can be repetitive at times as multiple authors seek to outline similar problems and challenges. I would advise readers to pick and choose specific essays that appeal to their interests and read those first. I found three essays especially interesting for my own understanding of the problems social media presents for democracy and what it might take to fix them. David A. Strauss's essay, "Social Media and First Amendment Fault Lines," is a helpful primer on what is at stake in terms of free speech as we consider the regulation of social media.

Second, Larry Kramer's "A Deliberate Leap in the Opposite Direction: The Need to Rethink Free Speech" is a fascinating and provocative essay. Kramer contends that "qualitative changes of the sort we have experienced in the underlying structure of our information environment call for, indeed, necessitate, a similar qualitative rethinking of the law, rights, and norms of free speech that structure it." Kramer's argument is ultimately an appeal for the regulation of social media on the basis of ethics. Social media companies, he writes

> are able to do something news and information services in the pre-internet period could not, *viz.*, gather detailed information on the potential interests of billions of people and use it to feed them material that draws their attention, whether desired or not. And because the platforms *can* do this, we seem impelled to concede that they *should* be permitted to do so.
>
> But why concede that? Why let these for-profit entities freely operate in a fashion that is wreaking havoc on our public discourse and democracy's future?

In addition to asking questions about the legality of social media regulation, Kramer reflects on the complex ethical terrain of the relationship between those of us who use social media and the companies who profit from it.

Finally, Renée Diresta's "Algorithms, Affordances, and Agency" should be required reading for anyone who wants to gain a clearer understanding of how social media has both empowered and manipulated people, and how it has both strengthened and eroded democratic agency. The seemingly contradictory impacts on human agency of our digitized politics have developed over decades. "Today, information moves by way of a system of algorithms and affordances and a historically unprecedented degree of agency" in which "ordinary people" create and spread content online. At the same time, "automated curators" (i.e., algorithms) present "a more opaque force in communications technology." For Diresta, the relationship between the human agents who create and spread content and the algorithms that amplify that content has "transformed speech and community."

Elizabeth Losh teaches English and American studies at William and Mary. In *Selfie Democracy*, she dives deeply into the ways that Barack Obama and Donald Trump leveraged digital technology (including social media) in their campaigns and administrations to promote what she calls their rhetoric of connection, transparency, participation, and access. Losh analyzes a broader swath of issues pertaining to digital politics than Bollinger and Stone deal with, although in the narrower context of presidential politics.

For example, Losh discusses the politicization of President Obama's BlackBerry use and the successes and failures of his administration's proliferation of new "dot gov" websites that solicited feedback from ordinary citizens, ostensibly to increase direct participation in government. She also unpacks Hillary Clinton's digital illiteracy, including how it may have contributed to the email server scandal that played a role in her 2016 loss. By looking at a complex "repertoire of digital practices," including but not limited to social media use, Losh reveals "the unintended consequences of wireless technologies on political leadership" and demonstrates "how seemingly benign mobile devices that hold out the promise of direct democracy undermine representative forms of government."

Both books address an important debate around what, if anything, should be done with Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. Presently, Section 230 shields social media companies from liability for content posted on their platforms. Losh describes the call for the repeal of Section 230 as primarily emerging from President Trump and other Republican officials who have seen social media companies as censoring conservative views. "Before Section 230," she writes, "any kind of content moderation provided by these platforms could be interpreted as accepting responsibility for absolutely everything posted on their sites. Repealing Section 230," therefore, would "dissuade platforms from moderating content." In other words, Trump and other social conservatives see Section 230 as allowing social media companies to remove speech they dislike. Repealing Section 230 would remove social media companies' liability shield and "place them in legal jeopardy with costly lawsuits."

But conservatives are not the only voices questioning Section 230. In his essay in the Bollinger and Stone book, Rhode Island senator Sheldon Whitehouse advocates for reforming the law to ease the spread of misinformation. He warns that a full repeal of Section 230 could simply cause new problems without solving old ones. For example, simply eliminating Section 230 is unlikely to stop the spread of misinformation, since much misinformation is not "legally actionable." It is not illegal to lie or to spread falsehoods, so it is unlikely that any litigation attempted against social media companies after a repeal of Section 230 would be successful on these grounds. When the object of misinformation is "to pollute the general information environment with lies, rather than to harass or slander an identified individual or company" (unlike, for instance, the parents of Sandy Hook massacre victims who successfully sued Alex Jones) it is quite difficult to identify "a proper plaintiff" or to "establish causation between the misinformation and the harm." Instead of repeal, Whitehouse favors reforms of Section 230 including a variety of transparency regulations and requiring "platforms to internalize the costs imposed by their algorithms, instead of solely reaping the profits." In this way, he suggests that if social media algorithms cause demonstrable harm, a reformed Section 230 could hold them accountable for that harm.

As American political life is increasingly both polarized and digitized, the work of scholars like Losh, Bollinger, and Stone becomes critical to help us understand the relationship between these two forces. Their books may be more suited to fellow academics than to a general audience, but for those of us who want to help form responsible digital citizens and are committed to quality civic discourse, both are helpful resources. ❑

ANNA FLOERKE SCHEID *teaches theology at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh.*

A blessedly particular theology of evil

John Swinton writes about the nature of evil without a shred of metaphysical obscurity.

by Jason Byassee

Deliver Us from Evil: A Call for Christians to Take Evil Seriously

By John Swinton (Cascade Books)

While some lectureships invite academics to speak to posterity and produce unread tomes, others seem to draw academics out to talk to ordinary civilians. (One of the most influential books in 20th-century liberal Protestantism, H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, originated as a short series of lectures at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.) John Swinton's new book falls into this second category.

Deliver Us from Evil began life as a series of lectures at Nazarene Theological College in Manchester, England, in 2020. They are blessedly, beautifully particular. They dive right into the murder of George Floyd, COVID and its repercussions, and the authoritarianism racing around Western democracies. The book also engages less recent but still haunting events, such as the Rwandan genocide. Swinton unpacks complex thought in ways that any reader will be able to comprehend: Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil," Walter Brueggemann's blistering prophetic voice and Ellen Davis's gentle one, and recent Pauline research on the powers and principalities by Susan Eastman. Swinton bravely tells us what he thinks without hiding behind academic jargon. His department at the University of Aberdeen has become a go-to for confidently voiced Protestant theology at a time when others flee confessional specificity.

This book is not quite a theodicy. That graveyard of modern theology and philosophy often ends up trying to explain the unexplainable, and Swinton is too interested in God to fall into that trap.

Swinton writes about the nature of evil without a shred of metaphysical obscurity. He knows the tradition's strong reliance on Augustine's notion of evil as a privation of the good, but he prefers to speak in more Pauline terms of evil as a defeated enemy. He uses Eastman's work on Paul to say that evil is multivalent. It has a personal component, and so it can be resisted. Yet it is also suprapersonal—the powers and principalities can only be defeated by Christ.

Perhaps Arendt's portrait of Adolf Eichmann as a banal bureaucrat is not a surprising example, but Swinton's subsequent example, pornography, is less expected: "It may seem

One strength of Swinton's book is its recurring Niebuhrian sense that evil may well lie more in us than in others.

banal and harmless to sit in our homes clicking away, but . . . [pornography use] significantly affects our mental health, changes the structure of our brains, and forces us to desire and indeed to crave things that are clearly not of God." In this way, pornography "feeds directly into the propagation of radical evil."

Swinton next turns to COVID circa early 2020. He doesn't ask why God would permit such mass evil, although he assumes that God does permit it. He doesn't blame governments that overstepped while doing their best. (One strength of the book is a recurring Niebuhrian sense that evil may well lie more in us than in others.) Swinton just asks whether normal is something we should ever long to return to. The virus revealed a level of evil we haven't begun to repent of: the wealthy act out of perceived scarcity, and the more wealth we have, the more we hoard. Swinton also worries about the social calluses that develop with distancing, for genocidal regimes take advantage of such small, dehumanizing gestures to launch more murderous schemes.

On to Rwanda, and here Emmanuel Katongole's groundbreaking work guides Swinton. *Génocidaires* are not moral relativists—they are moral purists of a sort, casting their projects in grandiose and binary terms. The tragedy of Rwanda is that it was viewed as an outstanding missionary success, with levels of Christian confession above 90 percent. Fellow Christians turned on one another murderously not because "tribes" had always hated one another, but because European colonizers made

tribal divisions "natural," backed by "science." More people died in churches than anywhere else. "For a little while, we were no longer ordinary Christians," one perpetrator confessed. Once again, Swinton pivots in an unexpected direction: we are now ignoring another genocide. The persecution of Christians globally is rampant, growing, and rarely denounced.

Swinton concludes with the virtues the church needs in order to pay attention to such overlooked evil. He notes that evil happens even when we have no evil intent; all we need to do is not pay attention. In response, he draws on Richard Foster to describe a sort of nonviolent spiritual warfare, like that of the martyrs. Others use such language quite violently—mass murderers in Norway and New Zealand claimed they were fighting for Christian civilization, although apparently without actually believing in God. The Eucharist is a central resource here, Swinton believes.

Drawing on Reformed theology, Swinton warns that the Eucharist can mislead as well as save. As in biblical Corinth, we might all claim to be at the Lord's Supper but actually be eating private meals of self-interest. We need other practices too, like the strident truth telling of the lament psalms, which join the prophets' voices to ours. In a refreshing refrain, Swinton states that practices are not enough—we also need the in-breaking power of God.

Deliver Us covers enormous territory. Some readers may quibble, especially if their preferred form of radical evil is unaddressed: sexual abuse and climate devastation are obvious omissions. Others may rather heckle legislatures than focus on internal Christian practices. Yet short books make no claim to exhaustiveness. The church desperately needs accessible and engaging theology, and that is precisely what Swinton offers here. ❑

JASON BYASSEE *is senior minister at Timothy Eaton Memorial Church in Toronto.*

Capitalism everywhere

Lucia Hulsether explores how the global economic system has absorbed the very movements that seek to resist it.

by Jeannine M. Pitas

Capitalist Humanitarianism
By Lucia Hulsether
(Duke University Press)

As someone who came of age in the 21st century, I witnessed capitalism's advance. Growing up in the shadow of NAFTA and other free trade agreements, I watched globalization lift people out of poverty across the world while stoking resentment among the US working class, including within my own family. I saw social media change how we communicate with one another, turning our interpersonal bonds into commodities bought and sold. I learned how extractive industries pollute ecosystems and destroy communities in the Global South while engaging in "corporate social responsibility" by funding universities and hospitals closer to home. I observed a friend's work on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives within one of Canada's largest banks.

Such contradictions are the focus of *Capitalist Humanitarianism*. Lucia Hulsether combines reportage, ethnographic research, personal narrative, and social theory to look at the ways in which the 21st-century global economic system has absorbed the very movements that seek to resist it.

"The new subject of neoliberalism, *Homo economicus*, has turned her entire life into a hustle," writes Hulsether, drawing upon political theorist Wendy Brown's 2015 book, *Undoing the Demos*. "She curates her online image until it reflects her 'personal brand.' She runs her household 'like a CEO.' She approaches friendships as 'investments' in a professional network. She relates to her government as a consumer of its services." Nevertheless, people are not stupid: we know how destructive the current economic system is. In response, we seek to make it a little less evil. Perhaps we buy fair-trade coffee or handmade gifts from a social enterprise shop; maybe we donate to microfinance projects. But these seemingly humane initiatives, Hulsether argues, have a nefarious side most of us cannot see, effectively whitewashing inhumane realities buried beneath the surface.

Looking at such entities as Ten Thousand Villages and Fairtrade International, Hulsether analyzes how fair-trade commerce perpetuates existing global inequalities by encouraging "Global North elites . . . to occupy this vexed solidarity with racialized children when we pull out our wallets." Not only can we buy without guilt, we believe that our purchases are doing good. But often this is not the case. Among her many case studies, Hulsether shows the asymmetrical

systems of power that our purchases perpetuate: Palestinian textile workers whose designs are sold to Israeli settlers, microloan recipients—most often female—whose lives are all but dominated by their (mostly male) creditors, and, in the most disturbing example, a Guatemalan micro-maquiladora where child labor is reframed as youth empowerment.

Juxtaposed to all these studies is the tragic death of the author's 26-year-old brother Mark, to whom the book is dedicated. In heartbreaking poetic interludes that punctuate the analysis, the author suggests that Mark—an artist who made his living by working a tedious, frustrating job in a call center—is a casualty of capitalism's abuses. Critical of her own and others' grief response, she also expresses skepticism toward emotions that "get a political pass," which allows them to "insulate lived experience from critique and underwrite dubious recovery projects whether or not they're conscious of it." She urges us to be wary of "any grief memoir that is the preface to an advice manual for corporate executives. Any grief memoir that ends in a nationalist credo. . . . Any and all grief that imposes normativity on the most endangered of the dead: the queer, the mad, the disconsolate, the extreme, the uncompromising, the lost."

The term *late capitalism*, which was coined by Ernest Mandel in 1972 to describe a "generalized universal industrialization" of society, has always confused me. Although it refers to advanced capitalism—capitalism reaching its logical conclusion—it has a temporal feel to it, a sense that this aging system cannot last forever; it is unsustainable and will have to end. But then, what will replace it?

Hulsether sees her role as a critic of capitalism; she does not propose an alternative economic system. She states that we live in a fallen world. Much like the Christian concepts of original sin or total depravity, which suggest that evil is a basic component of our human existence, capitalism is here to stay. Nevertheless, for a brief moment at the end of the book, she sets forth an alternative vision of reality:

> I want my university to divest from carbon and I want an immediate cessation of all oil drilling. I want you to stop buying things from the ten-headed monster disguised as an online megastore, and then I want to liquidate the assets of billionaires and reinvest them in public housing and public parks. I want us to go to the next zoning board meeting and block whatever property developer is gentrifying our city. I want [us] to read more books and, when we do, to get them from our local library. I want us all to have infinite time for pickup basketball, for going out dancing, for naps, and for whatever other pleasures we have been missing. I want free and universal comprehensive healthcare for all people. I want everyone I know to turn down all promotions into management, even if there is a cost to that refusal. I want you to give all your cash to the next street musician you see. I want to be clear that none of this is adequate.

Reading these words, I was reminded of a stanza near the end of Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert's 1973 poem "The Envoy of Mr. Cogito," translated by Bogdana Carpenter: "repeat old incantations of humanity fables and legends / because this is how you will attain the good you will not attain / repeat great words repeat them stubbornly / like those crossing the desert who perished in the sand."

This stance of constant resistance to an unjust system, even in the seeming absence of alternatives, is what Hulsether—who is a union activist as well as a teacher and scholar—calls us to take on. For Christian readers, this book reminds us of the critical stance Jesus took toward the social order in which he lived. We are called to lament the fallen world in which we live, then seek to build the kingdom of God within it. Hulsether's book models this approach beautifully, urging us to "write a history of the impossible" in which "survival is not the end." □

JEANNINE MARIE PITAS *is a poet and a Spanish-English translator who teaches at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania.*

Understanding the ideology of guns

Sociologist Jennifer Carlson interviewed 50 gun sellers to find out why so many Americans flock toward firearms.

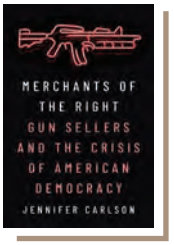
by David P. Gushee

Jennifer Carlson, who teaches sociology at Arizona State University, is a noted expert on US gun culture. By my count, this is her third full-length work on the subject, in addition to a coedited volume. But this important new book begins in a highly personal way, reflecting a problem with which many of us can deeply identify. Carlson says she writes in part to try to understand the politics of her own late father, from whom she was deeply estranged, at least politically. They couldn't talk about politics—the divide was too large.

Carlson says that, before her father's death in 2019, her dad "still managed to vote absentee one last time in Michigan, where his vote counted much more than it would had he cast it in Arizona. . . . On the day that Trump was elected, I was angry that my father couldn't see the consequences of his vote." She wonders whether her father would have been all in on everything that happened over the next four years, and everything that continues to happen in the aftermath of the Trump-created crisis after the 2020 election. This book, then, shows a sociologist doing her work to understand what has gone wrong on the American right, motivated by a desire to understand her dead father.

Carlson had me with this introduction, and off we went. The book's method stems from Carlson's in-depth interviews with 50 US gun sellers in four states, undertaken during the pandemic. The interviewees are identified for the reader by age and state each time they are quoted. While Carlson also cites progun media sources and other relevant background studies, the interviews are both central and hugely illuminating.

The book's context is the surge in gun sales during the epic days of 2020 and thereafter. The convergence of the pandemic, the George Floyd murder and consequent protests, the 2020 elections, and the January 6 insurrection triggered massive gun sales. These sales moved beyond the typical conservative White male buyers to include many other segments of the population, all of whom felt threatened in different ways by contemporary events. Carlson shows that in most states during the pandemic, gun shops were treated as essential services and were not shut down by pandemic regulations, at least not for long. At a time when it felt like US society was rocked to its foundations, more and more Americans found solace and comfort in their guns.



Merchants of the Right: Gun Sellers and the Crisis of American Democracy

By Jennifer Carlson (Princeton University Press)

The book's purpose is not just to document these remarkable developments but to examine the ideology about guns that sellers brought into their encounters with customers during this fateful period—and to ask what this reveals about contemporary right-wing ideology, including that edge of it that is moving away from support for democracy.

Carlson's discovery is that this progun ideology consists of three pillars: armed individualism, conspiracism, and partisanship. Armed individualism "positions guns as the solution to both government overreach *and* government underreach." Conspiracist thinking—about the pandemic, government responses, gun legislation, you name it—"stood to undermine liberal democracy by stigmatizing collective action as either too spontaneous to take seriously or so well-organized as to be suspicious." Extreme partisanship directed by conservative gun sellers against liberals "took shape *not* as principled disagreement among political equals *but rather* as an impulse to stigmatize, pathologize, and even dehumanize political adversaries."

Carlson concludes by labeling "contemporary gun politics" as "the canary in the coal mine of American democracy," a revelation of extreme libertarianism and the growing antidemocratic illiberalism that is destabilizing American culture and politics. Gun culture and its purveyors, therefore, are important for Carlson not just in themselves and because of their epically awful results, but as a window into the forces that threaten to unravel our society and our democracy. This book is a must-read for all who seek to understand those forces. ❑

DAVID P. GUSHEE *teaches Christian ethics at Mercer University in Atlanta and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.*

The cost of parking

Henry Grabar makes the case that in nearly any realm, from the environment to the economy, justice starts with parking reform.

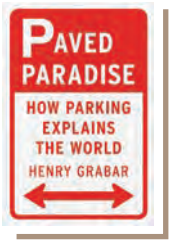
by G. Travis Norvell

As a parent and a pastor of a multigenerational church, I know that when teenagers approach their chores (in the church, we call this volunteering) they do so with this simple question in mind: What is the least I can do, yet still have an impact? This is a question Henry Grabar asks repeatedly in *Paved Paradise*, and the answer is always parking.

Parking reform is the place where you can do the least amount of work and still make significant changes. Grabar writes, "If you want lower emissions and fewer car accidents, parking is the place to start. It's not the only way to get fewer people to drive. But because every trip ends with a parking space, it's the easiest." As it turns out, if you want to work for justice in nearly any realm, from the environment to the economy, you should start with parking.

Parking is ubiquitous, but no one really knows how much parking there is in America. Counterintuitively, Des Moines, Iowa, has as many parking spots as Seattle. In New York City, nobody is quite certain how many street-level parking spots the city owns: numbers vary from somewhere between 1 million and 3 million spots. Since there is no real hard data on the number of parking spots, cities do not know how to adequately price them. In 2008, the City of Chicago leased its parking meters to Morgan Stanley for 75 years for more than $1 billion—only to discover later that they had underestimated the value of the parking by at least half.

The two easiest parking policy changes every American city could enact are increasing the price of parking and abolishing parking minimums. Rather than provide a pamphlet on these policies and how to change them, Grabar tells us the story of parking in America. Along the way to these reforms, we meet a parking garage owner and low-income housing developers, hear stories from New York City parking attendants, get educated by Donald Shoup (the prophet of parking reforms), find ourselves surprised that there's a trade publication called *Parking Today*, and learn to appreciate many other personalities in the parking world. These stories and personalities are needed because they show the mess we are in when it comes to parking and reveal how enacting reform will not be easy. As Grabar puts it, "We expect parking to be immediately available, directly in front of our destination, and most importantly, free."



Paved Paradise: How Parking Explains the World

By Henry Grabar (Penguin Press)

This expectation leads to a number of problems. We often treat free parking on public streets as private property. During the winter in many northern American cities, car owners use kitchen chairs, pylons, mannequins, and couches to reserve the on-street parking spots they regard as their own. My neighbor in Minneapolis gets mad and calls the police when someone parks in "his spot" on the street in front of our houses. Contrary to these behaviors, private individuals do not own on-street parking places. They are a public good; we all "own" them.

At the same time, we expect parking spaces (whether public or private) to be used solely for the temporary storage of automobiles. British cartoonist Dave Walker once drew a cartoon called "Storage" to illustrate this absurdity *(refer line here TK)*.

Individuals can place their private property on public land, but only if that property is a vehicle. We can't use parking spots to store a wardrobe of old clothes or boxes of odds and ends or used appliances. We can store our cars and only our cars.

Fortunately, this trend is starting to change, thanks in part to the efforts of churches. Some churches are converting their parking lots from the temporary storage of cars to the permanent housing of neighbors. In Minneapolis, Calvary Lutheran Church's parking lot (located a block from George Floyd Square) is now affordable housing; in St. Paul, Prince of Peace Lutheran Church's parking lot now hosts two tiny homes for those who previously experienced homelessness; and in Asheville, North Carolina, First Baptist Church and the YMCA have entered an arrangement to develop their shared parking lot into an urban village.

Abolishing parking minimums (rules about how many parking places must be placed in lots with new construction)

When parking minimums are abolished from building codes, affordable housing and community flourishing quickly follow.

may seem as easy as hitting the delete key, but Grabar notes how deeply they are baked into our building codes. These guidelines are as varied and nonsensical as the flavors of sugary cereals at the grocery store. They add between $19,000 and $30,000 per structured parking space to the cost of housing developments and commercial projects. Grabar shows that when parking minimums are abolished, as Los Angeles and Minneapolis and Cleveland have done, affordable housing and community flourishing quickly follow.

I once heard a church growth guru say, "The key to your church's growth is not how great your sermons are (although that helps) or if your choir sings on key (although that helps too). The key is in the details. Are there typos in the bulletin? Is the front door accessible? Are the signs clear?" Parking may seem like a boring detail for a church to focus on, but it's a detail that yields extremely high returns.

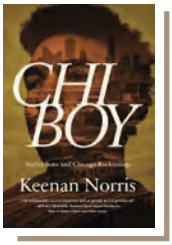
Most of the interest in my writing about church parking has come from urbanists, place makers, and city planners. They frequently tell me that they want to partner with faith communities to bring about healthier and thriving neighborhoods, but when they reach out, nobody returns their calls or emails. Reading Grabar's book might help faith communities enter into public conversations about a future that is less car-centric and more community-centric. To my ears, this sounds a lot like the gospel. ❑

G. TRAVIS NORVELL *is pastor of Judson Memorial Baptist Church in Minneapolis.*

Memoir of a native son's son

Keenan Norris's sobering book explores Chicago's role in forging the identity of the Black man in modern America.

by Richard A. Rosengarten



Chi Boy: Native Sons and Chicago Reckonings

By Keenan Norris (Ohio State University Press)

***Chi Boy* is in style and in form a pastiche,** with the city of Chicago as its axis mundi. Keenan Norris presents Chicago as both the existential and the historical touchstone for the composite American that is the Black man, from Richard Wright to Jeff Fort to Barack Obama to those who died young either in the city or in deep connection with it: Emmett Till, Yummy Sandifer, and even a young Black woman, Hadiya Pendleton. Chicago in Norris's narrative is the essence of the Great Migration in all its potential and all its tragedy, a chronology borne out in the unique political machine that was Richard Daley's mayoralty and later in the city's scandalously relentless murder rate.

At the same time, *Chi Boy* is a book written by a son about his father. Its formal arrangement as pastiche foreshadows this throughout and brings it into utter and utterly beautiful relief in the closing chapters.

There is method to Norris's juxtaposition of pastiche with memoir: those closing chapters in which the author reconnects with his dying father would be far less forceful without the preceding, ruminative assemblage of history, social analysis, family lore, and speculation that are the circumstances of "the boy who would become the man who would become my father."

The world of Keenan Norris's father began in Chicago and was in some meaningful sense always "Chicago." Calvin Preston Norris was a native son of the city, a Black boy whose experience was marked by real poverty and genuine promise. What was bred by the city and what was in his bones as a human being remains a riddle. Naturally fast, Calvin became a track star whose speed would eventually result in a college scholarship. Before that, in one of this book's most remarkable scenes, Calvin's mother removed her son from a domestic situation made impossible by his father, heading west in the family car, only to see the man of the house she was leaving follow them and eventually, with his wife's acquiescence, commandeer their westward journey. The scene shows how much of Calvin is encompassed by each of his parents: the admixture of defiance with determination, the insistence that a wrong can be made right. Tenacity of character—exhibited

in very different ways by both the mother and father on that journey—captures both what Chicago imposes on Black people and what it elicits from them by way of response.

Ultimately, that imposition presents stark options: to leave or to die. If Norris is most interested in the story of his father, who left Chicago for Fresno, California, he is bracingly clear about the cost of staying. For Norris, it is the exemplarity of figures such as Wright and Obama that guarantees their departure from the city, while it is the fate of those like Yummy Sandifer who stay to die young. Norris finds in his father a Black man who strikes an unusual middle course: saved by a mother who removes him from the city for a life that is, if publicly unremarkable, distinctive and truthful to his self.

All of this makes *Chi Boy* at once sobering yet hopeful. Such is its particular force that as a longtime resident of the city's South Side I found myself at sixes and sevens, at once nodding in agreement while objecting irritably to some of the book's broader strokes. Such idiosyncratic sortings are ultimately beside Norris's point: the powerful claim that Chicago is the city that more than any other has forged the fraught identity of the Black man in modern America.

Chi Boy is at its best in showing the complex vectors of this claim within the Black community itself. This emerges forcefully in Norris's engagement with the complex dialogue within the Black community about the reflexive ways in which Chicago is represented, especially in cinema and in music, as inveterately and savagely violent. Norris's rendition of the "Chi-Raq" controversy as it plays out among cultural actors as various as Spike Lee, Kanye West, and Chance the Rapper is subtly observed and a forceful rebuke to one-dimensional representations of this complex urban space. Debates within the Black community about how best to represent Chicago offer the most persuasive evidence to support Norris's brief for the city's formative significance for Black men.

A second, equally complex yet more personal vector is Norris's emphatic and movingly rendered return, in the book's closing chapters, to his father and their rekindled relationship as his father lives out his last years. Norris describes in spare, honorific detail his father's immense dignity in the face of acute diagnoses that he survives against all odds, as well as the serenity of his eventual death. The book emerges, in this closing account, as the elegy of a life that exemplified serenity, wisdom, and courage even as it did not exemplify the conventional patterns of good fathering.

The last and decisive truth in *Chi Boy* is that the father gives the son in the way that he dies what the son most needs. And the reader in turn understands how this gift has prompted the son to retrace by any and all means available the steps his father had to take—in Chicago and beyond—to accomplish that. ❑

RICHARD A. ROSENGARTEN *teaches religion and literature at the University of Chicago Divinity School.*

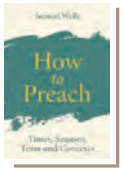
In Brief

Epiphany: The Season of Glory (Fullness of Time series)
By Fleming Rutledge
IVP Academic

"The season of Epiphany is designed to show that there is no road to the glory of God through human seeking," writes Fleming Rutledge in this collection of essays. "It comes as pure gift." Although the Fullness of Time series is aimed at readers who are new to the liturgical calendar, even seasoned liturgists will find wisdom in Rutledge's reflections on Epiphany and its related themes—glory, revelation, star, wine, river, and more. This text, like most of Rutledge's writing, is deeply theological, consistently biblical, and accessible to nonspecialists.

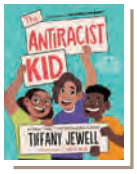
The Mysteries
By Bill Watterson and John Kascht
Andrews McMeel

This book's story line (by Bill Watterson) and illustrations (by Watterson and caricaturist John Kascht) are a far cry from Calvin and Hobbes, although fans of the comic strip may notice echoes of familiar themes such as curiosity and adventure, epistemic uncertainty, and the fallibility of authority figures. Marketed as "a fable for grown-ups," *The Mysteries* tells a cautionary tale about being human in a world that is more immense and complex than we can imagine. The narrative zooms across space and through time, beginning in a forest and ending (many eons later) with "the universe."



How to Preach: Times, Seasons, Texts, Contexts
By Samuel Wells
Canterbury Press

Some readers may approach Sam Wells's new book with their hubris radar turned on: it's a collection of his own sermons accompanied by explanations of how those sermons model good preaching. But the sermons in *How to Preach* are, in fact, very good sermons, and there is no hubris in the way Wells presents the challenges and principles behind their composition. This book feels like a gift: a distillation of wisdom from a seasoned preacher that gets specific enough to be truly useful in various circumstances and liturgical seasons.



The Antiracist Kid: A Book about Identity, Justice, and Activism
By Tiffany Jewell, illustrated by Nicole Miles
Versify

This book, written for children in late elementary school, is unapologetic about the value of discerning and naming various aspects of identity, the dangers that arise when power and prejudice intersect, the evolution of the concept of race, the oppression that lingers after colonialism and slavery, and the value of speaking up when you see injustice around you. Filled with clear definitions, concrete examples, and colorful illustrations, *The Antiracist Kid* will appeal not only to older children but also to adults who want to deepen their understanding of the principles and language behind diversity, equity, and inclusion work.

An island in the storm

Paul Harding's evocative novel begins with the 1815 hurricane off the New England coast.

by David A. Hoekema

Violent storms often mark turning points in epic narratives. King Lear staggers across a windswept heath, bemoaning the loss of his kingdom and his mind. Battered by a hurricane in the Florida Everglades, Zora Neale Hurston's characters shelter in their flimsy shanties; "they seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God." Storms pummel the Yorkshire moors when a spurned Heathcliff runs from the house of his beloved in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. At the apex of Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom* (a film that derives its structure in part from Benjamin Britten's opera *Noye's Fludde*) a great storm wreaks destruction on a village.

A storm of biblical proportions ravages the New England coast in the opening pages of Paul Harding's *This Other Eden*. Patience Honey, an immigrant from Ireland who had settled on an uninhabited Maine island two decades earlier with her African husband, runs outside just before the storm smashes her house into splinters, thinking to herself that "this was the Judgment and what was to be was to be; it was useless to try to outrun the outstretched arm of the Lord." Benjamin and Patience sweep up their grandchildren in their arms and climb the tallest tree on the island. As the tree sways and nearly snaps in the gale, they watch the floodwaters destroy homes and farms and orchards and then at last subside. Some family members and neighbors who climb up after them are spared; others are swept away and drowned.

Like the great biblical flood, which causes both the near destruction and the renewal of the human family, the hurricane of 1815 decimates but does not destroy the mixed-race community on the island. Apple Island is "a granite pebble in the frigid Atlantic," separated from the mainland by just 300 feet of tidal shallows—and by an unbridgeable gulf of racial prejudice and social isolation.

The story of the storm is recounted nearly a century later by the first settlers' great-granddaughter Esther, who presides from her rocking chair over two more generations of the Honey family. She is the matriarch, too, of a ragged community of outcasts and misfits, the "distillate of Angolan fathers and Scottish grandpas, Irish mothers and Congolese grannies, Cape Verdean uncles and Penobscot aunts, cousins from Dingle, Glasgow, and Montserrat." Living in rough-hewn cabins, repurposed fishing vessels, and a hollowed-out tree, a dozen island dwellers eke out a living from farming, fishing, gathering berries, and providing day labor and laundry services for mainland families.

This Other Eden: A Novel

By Paul Harding (W. W. Norton)

Like Hurston, who describes an actual storm (the Okeechobee hurricane of 1928, one of the most powerful ever recorded) in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Harding builds *This Other Eden* on a foundation of history. The Great September Gale of 1815 destroyed 500 homes and took 38 lives in New England. And a tiny coastal island, Malaga Island, was uninhabited until a formerly enslaved man and his White wife settled there in 1794, raised a family, and were joined by a few others seeking refuge from societal scorn. The isolated Eden of their descendants ended in 1911 with forcible eviction, not by angels bearing swords but by state authorities who determined by precise cranial measurements, applying the fashionable science of eugenics, that generations of racial mixing had produced a population of subhumans. Some of the residents were committed to the Maine School for the Feeble-Minded. This history is documented in local sources and state records.

But Harding's novel is a work of imagery and imagination, not history. He invites us to inhabit the lives and worlds of characters he has created. "I think of my writing as interrogative," he told a *New York Times* interviewer: "You just go in there, and you just listen and look and describe." What Harding hears as he listens is a rich tapestry of unexpected analogies, vivid images, and arresting descriptions of hardscrabble lives.

When arrangements are made for Ethan, one of the Honey children who has shown a talent for drawing, to lodge with a wealthy friend on the mainland—a possibility only because the boy can pass for White—the islanders send him off with a great feast. There are oysters and lobsters from the ocean, corn from the fields, truffles from the forest,

and beer from who knows where. The islanders sing hymns, sea shanties, and "women's desolate, joyous songs." It is an event never before experienced, never to be repeated. "The islanders were so used to diets of wind and fog, to meals of slow-roasted sunshine and packed storm clouds, so used to devouring sautéed shadows and broiled echoes; they found themselves stupefied by such an abundance of food and drink."

Everywhere on the island, and in the lives of its residents, there are layers of light and layers of darkness. Esther is tormented by memories of the monster who was her father. The missionary teacher who builds the first school on the island to broaden the horizons of its children—one of whom quickly grasps advanced mathematics, another the composition of Latin poetry—cannot shake his belief in a hierarchy of higher and lower races. The oldest island resident (by appearance, since no one knows anyone's year of birth) is a hermit who carves elaborate biblical tableaux into the hollow tree that he lives in. Later he decides it is a pointless exercise and sets fire to the tree.

Harding uses evocative phrases on nearly every page. "Evening came over the meadows," he writes, "and the haystacks lowered into deep blues and purples as the sky flared and lowered, too." He relishes the arcane vocabulary of fishers and farmers and foresters: we observe a tedder in the hayfields, a drail on a fishing line, a thwartsaw and a froe in the forest, and a young workman peening a scythe.

At times, biblical themes come to the surface. Sketching a dead bird, young Ethan ponders whether Noah's family "found the bodies of the drowned everywhere they went, jammed under boulders, slung in the tops of dead trees, splayed on the plains." The schoolteacher explains in a sermon that the Genesis version of the flood of Gilgamesh proclaims the unity of the entire human family, a doctrine of which he hasn't managed to convince himself. As government representatives draw up eviction orders, we are told: "Lawyers are filing documents. Judges are signing orders. Scientists and doctors are collecting data. Pharaoh's heart is as hard as ever."

This is a novel about race, poverty, loyalty and betrayal, the horrors of eugenic science, and the cruelty of the powerful. All of those themes are present. But beyond that, it is a narrative whose poetry and imagery shed light on the inner lives of people with whom readers have nearly nothing, and nearly everything, in common. ❑

DAVID A. HOEKEMA, *a visiting scholar at the University of Arizona and professor emeritus at Calvin University, is author of* We Are the Voice of the Grass.

Teen sex comedies for a sex-positive generation

In the raunchy high school comedies of my youth, sex was a forbidden land. Not in *Sex Education* and *Bottoms*.

by Kathryn Reklis

Kathryn Reklis teaches theology at Fordham University.

Having just blown it with her high school crush, Josie (Ayo Edebiri) imagines a future in which she never finds a woman to love, she gets knocked up by a closeted gay man, she is forced to join a church where her gay husband will become the pastor ("Sure, his sermons are good, but everybody knows he's fruity"), their son hates them for their dishonest lives, and she is lonely and alone. It is a tour de force monologue that sets the stage for the wild, raunchy energy of *Bottoms* (directed by Emma Seligman).

Bottoms leans heavily into the tropes of the quirky high school comedy, in which kids pegged as nerdy losers somehow invert the social hierarchy of high school or at least offer a way out of its terrorizing grip. The structure of this plot device is so well developed in popular culture that it took almost half the movie for me to realize how over-the-top *Bottoms* is. The football players wear their uniforms everywhere they go. The school is plastered in posters elevating the quarterback to a semidivine status. ("He might be watching you right now," the posters declare.) Adult authority figures are at best checked out and at worst verbally abusive.

The satire is thick and obvious: any culture that prizes hypermasculine sexualized violence is going to get a world built in that image. Everyone, football players and dorky lesbians alike, lusts after the pretty, popular cheerleaders, and everyone talks about sex in violent, possessive terms. When a rumor leads to the nerds being mistaken for juvenile delinquents, they decide to translate their street cred into currency in the high school popularity market. Under the auspices of self-defense, they start a fight club for girls. The fight club morphs from a funny gag into a deadly serious endeavor, and by the third act we have left reality entirely behind for an increasingly absurd parable of bloodlust and moral redemption.

Bottoms feels like a mash-up of violent cartoons, TikTok gags, and YouTube sketches, all peppered with comedic zingers. When I tried to watch it as a realistic coming-of-age story, I was confused and even a little repulsed. But there is a cult-classic-in-the-making vibe to the entire project that kept pulling me in, and the more I gave myself over to its absurd fairy-tale qualities, the more I found myself seduced by its rambunctious energy.

Then again, I will give just about any version of the quirky high school comedy genre a chance. I love them, surely in part because I was one of those quirky, loser kids, an ex-homeschooled evangelical who was discovering a love of theater and a penchant for talking too much in class. The genre is built on the revelation that there is a wider, more wonderful world than the preening, self-aggrandizing world of high school popularity. We can watch and laugh from the morally comforting position of those who survived the gauntlet and hope to assert, after the fact at least, that none of that nonsense mattered to us anyway. Probably because we want to imagine that if we could see past it in high school, we can see past it in adulthood too.

I came to *Bottoms* straight from the fourth season of *Sex Education* (created by Laurie Nunn; now on Net-

The cast of Bottoms

AGATA NOWICKA

ORION PICTURES

flix). The same hierarchies of cool are all there, with some British modifications. Our nerdy protagonist Otis Milburn (Asa Butterfield) discovers he has a knack for helping his peers work through their sex and relationship woes, channeling all the pep talks and therapy advice he's heard from his sex therapist mom (Gillian Anderson) for years.

There is a lot of awkward, often hilarious, always explicit sex in this show, so depending on your own attitudes toward adolescent sex education, you might or might not decide that it is something to watch with a high schooler in your life. Like many high school comedies, it takes for granted that sex is the primary obsession of the teenage years: thinking about it, doing it, wishing you were doing it. But unlike the raunchy teenage comedies of my youth, sex isn't a forbidden land policed by sexist double standards where the best a teen can hope for is access to some dad's hidden *Playboy* magazines and some alcohol-induced groping. The teens in *Sex Education* have access to a panoply of porn and a whole internet of sex positivity.

It turns out knowing a lot about sex and being able to talk about it unabashedly don't always make it easier to do. In fact, the show's deepest insight is that once freed from the ideology of sexual purity, the teens can do the much harder work of figuring out intimacy, self-knowledge, and care. The characters are confused and frustrated, but ultimately so much wiser than I could ever imagine being at 16.

Comparing the show to *Bottoms*, however, made me wonder if I had been suckered into a middle-aged fantasy of teenage sex positivity. *Sex Education* is so earnest it feels like the wish fulfillment of a much older adult imagining what high school could be like if all the teens had the wisdom of the show's middle-aged creators. The characters in *Bottoms* are nowhere near as wise, thoughtful, or self-aware as the idealized nerdy protagonist of an adult fantasy. Maybe this is because the creators of the film haven't turned 30 yet; maybe it is because they resist a fully realized moral vision. The movie ends with an apology, a promise to try harder, and hints of romantic closure. Oh, and a whole lot of blood. It is bizarre, unfinished, and not entirely rational. Kind of like real adolescence. ❑

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Lorenzo Hurtado Segovia's ***Papel Tejido 40 (Él derrama lluvia sobre la tierra y envía agua sobre los campos)***

For immigrants facing hardships, family gatherings are crucial. I remember *mi mamá* and *mis tías* huddled in a bedroom with bolts of fabric and sewing accessories. The shared ritual held expectancy and accountability—hope for what was yet to come and the inspiration needed to begin projects. Thanks to Los Angeles artist Lorenzo Hurtado Segovia, I now recognize that they were also creating a sacred space.

For his *papel tejido* (woven paper) pieces, Hurtado Segovia cuts long, thin strips of painted paper, crisscrossing them over and under. Repetition produces woven sheets reminiscent of blankets, ceremonial robes, and tapestries. Weaving yields bright plaids, images of mountain ranges, and Christian symbols. Hurtado Segovia's jubilant forms represent three traits needed to defy alienation: festival, craft, and play.

Papel Tejido 40 evokes Mexican folk art decorations used for fiestas. Festivals bring people together to offer reprieve from the strains of daily life. Likewise, Hurtado Segovia offers stunning woven items to nourish souls, just as fiestas set time aside for tangible pleasures that revive and feed resilience.

Hurtado Segovia represents a craft tradition in which labor ensures survival. Born in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, he notes that, amid the poverty, "everyone in our neighborhood knew how to make things." He told the *Latin Times* that his social circle—carpenters, welders, and seamstresses—taught him that "you can do it if you want to." Craft, then, is a vehicle for self-actualization—acts of repair on multiple levels.

Exuberant play uplifts. Hurtado Segovia's paper hangings express ongoing joy through patterning and a vivid palette. They infuse spaces with life and movement. Modest in material and method, the pieces prompt others to play along. Hurtado Segovia secures a place for wonder—a place to hope for what is yet to come and inspire the labor necessary to greet it. This is sacred space. ❑

Art commentary by **MARIA FEE**, *an artist, theologian, and educator.*

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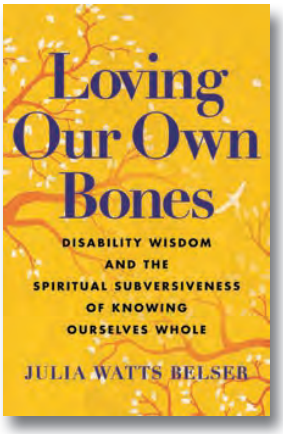

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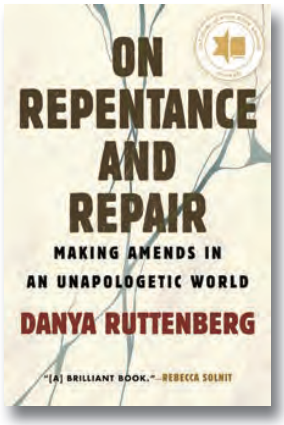

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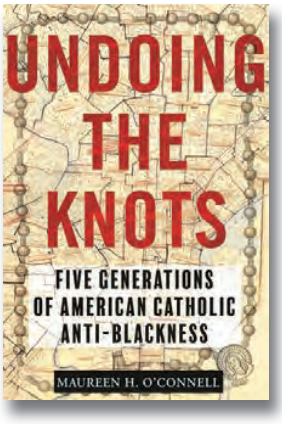

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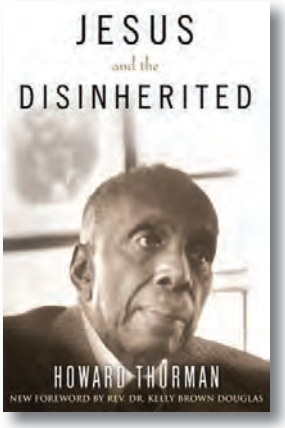

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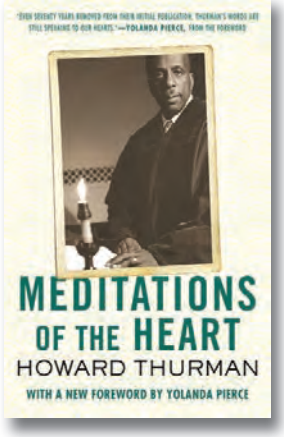

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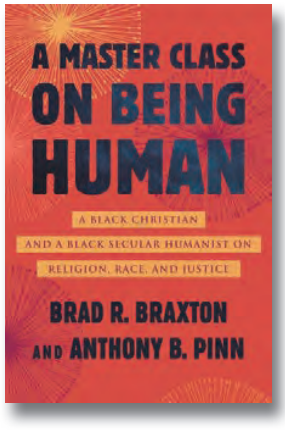

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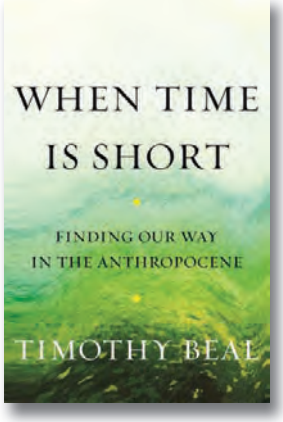

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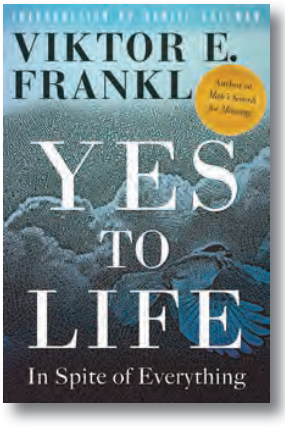

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