

America

The background of the cover is a photograph of the United States Capitol building in Washington, D.C. The image shows the iconic white neoclassical architecture, including the large dome and classical columns. An American flag is flying on a tall pole in the foreground, partially obscuring the building. The sky is a clear, bright blue.

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY

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Our Secular Future

R. R. RENO

Our Divided Church

A VIEW FROM ABROAD

MASSIMO FAGGIOLI

I lived in London for nearly three years before I set foot in Westminster Abbey. Since the 16th-century English reformations, the Abbey has been the most prominent and cherished place of worship in the Church of England. Americans will know the Abbey from television coverage of the funeral of Princess Diana and the wedding of her son Prince William. The place is a curious admixture of church and state, Catholic and Protestant, self-adulation and transcendent beauty. As a Roman Catholic, I experienced an unexpected, almost visceral parochial anxiety as I entered the church, as if my body contained the relics of centuries of fear and resentment between Protestants and Catholics. This should not have come as a surprise, I suppose. Self-inflicted wounds to the body of Christ continue to gape and mar even today.

As an American, I was uneasy with the entanglement of church and state in the Abbey's furnishings and ceremonial. Americans have a cultivated aversion to this sort of thing. We've made a paradoxical religion out of the separation of church and state, a situation that is itself the historical progeny of what is represented in Westminster Abbey. While I harbor some reservations about R. R. Reno's essay in this issue, I concede his basic point that the next phase in that story will involve "a shift from individual freedom from religion to a vision of society as a whole free from religious influence." That would be tragic.

The separation of church and state is both prudent and necessary, but the separation of the church and the political is inconceivable. For my part, I am more comfortable these days with the church and the state sharing a common space, precisely because "the city of God is not so much a space as a performance," as William T. Cavanaugh has written. In a way, then, I rather appreciate the proximity of church and

state in the Abbey: it is an opportunity for the truth of revelation to scandalize humankind's nationalist fictions.

Yet does that happen? Throughout my visit, I couldn't help but wonder whether the Abbey was enacting the "comedy" of the city of God or the "tragedy" of the city of man. The monuments to the tragic figures of empire share cherished space with those to the equally tragic figures of a gloomy modernity. In some ways, the Abbey has simply swapped one metanarrative for another. Yet is either story truly inspired by, indeed authored by, the Gospel? I wondered whether an ecclesial body so "dominated by and structured on the principles of liberal tolerance," as Joseph Ratzinger once wrote, "in which the authority of revelation is subordinate to democracy and private opinion" is fully capable of publicly bearing witness to the obviously countercultural imperatives of the Gospel.

The eucharistic service in the Abbey was beautiful. It was not simply the lovely music or the fine liturgica that made it so; it was the fact that an in-breaking of the Holy Spirit, a divine comedy, was being enacted right there amid the more prominent relics of humankind's tragic scheming. In front of the monument to George Canning, the imperial prime minister (who, the monument tells us without concern for Christian humility, rose "by his own merit"), and just 100 feet or so from Ted Hughes in Poets' Corner (also a place not overly concerned with Christian humility) there was this in-breaking of Christ, a moment when the temporal was touched by the eternal, a moment of incarnation. Yet for all its beauty, I couldn't help but wonder whether this moment was the "scandal" it should have been, whether it was really lifting our gaze from the Abbey's monuments to faded and ill-sought glory, to the living and eternal memorial of the glorified Christ who was now among us.

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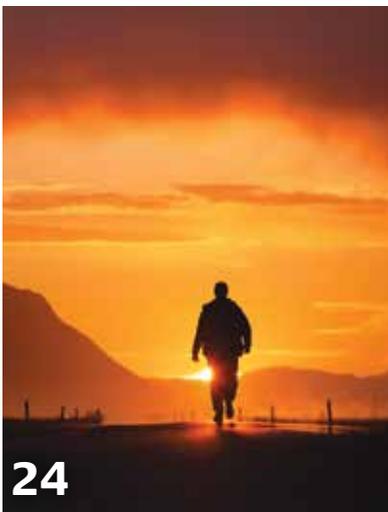
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ON THE WEB

At "**The Living Word**," Brian B. Pinter writes on **taunting in Scripture** and how Jesus ministered to those who were bullied. Plus, a selection of articles on **religious liberty** and a podcast discussion of the **Oscar nominees**. All at americamagazine.org.



Europe's Nomads

The French government has continued its harsh treatment of the Roma people in recent months. Despite protests from the international community, President François Hollande has followed up on the policies of his predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy, by clearing Roma camps. Over 21,000 Roma were deported in 2013, double the number of the previous year. Many of them came to France after being evicted from Bulgaria and Romania.

The Roma, also known as gypsies, are unpopular throughout Europe, where their makeshift camps have long been a source of resentment. Prejudice against them goes back centuries but took a virulent turn during World War II, when an estimated 500,000 Roma were killed at the order of Adolf Hitler.

The United Nations has asked the French government to end the vicious cycle of forced evictions and to work alongside grass-roots groups that minister to Roma migrants. Catholic leaders in France are heeding Pope Francis' call to focus on the plight of the poor by advocating for this persecuted minority. "People of Bulgarian and Romanian origin have come to live in our country, and for several years now, we've seen no policy offered other than that of refusing acceptance to the greatest number," Archbishop Georges Pontier of Marseille said in November. Even those "behaving reasonably and peacefully" were denied basic necessities, the archbishop said, and were subject to acts of violence and "hateful, unrestrained remarks."

A long-term solution is impossible without the cooperation of the whole European community. The well-being of the Roma cannot depend on the vicissitudes of local government policies. Continued pressure from the United Nations, combined with strong support from religious leaders in Europe, may be the only way to ensure slow but steady progress.

Homes for the Homeless

Our editorial "A Home for Christmas" (12/23) and many a homily have called public attention to the plight of the homeless, but they are still here by the thousands, stretched out in church pews or huddled in doorways across the nation. A problem too great for private charity, it demands the attention of the state and federal government.

Some major cities have responded by arresting the victims or requiring religious groups to pay for a permit in order to feed the homeless in public parks. Utah, in contrast, under Republican Gov. Jon Huntsman, started a program in 2005

called Housing First that identified the chronically homeless and designed strategies to supply permanent or transitional housing to meet their needs. The state calculated that the costs of emergency services and incarceration amount to \$16,670 each year for a chronically homeless person but found that it could supply each person with an apartment and case management services for \$11,000.

As a result of the program, the number of chronically homeless people in Utah has dropped from 1,900 in 2005 to fewer than 500 today. How did this happen? The apartment itself, plus the attention of an assigned case worker, gives people basic stability and enables them to get their lives in order, search for jobs and confront physical and psychological problems. And they are allowed to keep the apartment even when they fail. Housing is a basic human right. Other states should consider the Utah solution.

Tear Down This Wall

Just as the peace talks between Israel and Palestine seem to be sputtering, Israel has thrown still another obstacle in the road: their attempt to extend the separation wall through the Cremisan Valley. In the West Bank, just south of Jerusalem and next to Bethlehem, the valley is a beloved oasis, if not stronghold, of Christianity. If the wall is built, a convent of Salesian sisters who run a school with 400 students, a monastery of brothers and 58 Christian farmers would be cut off from their work, recreational lands and water sources. It is far from the international border drawn after the Six Day War in 1967.

Bishop Richard E. Pates of Des Moines, Iowa, along with bishops from Europe, Canada and South Africa, visited the agricultural valley in January. The bishops have acknowledged Israel's need for security, but strongly condemned the seizure of land. On Jan. 28, Bishop Pates asked Secretary of State John Kerry to press Israel to "cease and desist in its efforts to unnecessarily confiscate Palestinian lands in the Occupied West Bank." He wrote about his visit to the valley: "I was simply astounded by the injustice of it all."

The community in the Cremisan Valley received some temporary relief on Feb. 3. In response to a citizens' appeal, the Israeli Supreme Court issued a preliminary order to stop construction of the wall in that area. Israel has until April 10 to explain why there are no alternative routes. In October 2012, the Catholic ordinaries of the Holy Land said the planned construction of the wall "will put more pressure" on the Christians living in Bethlehem, and "more people will make the decision to leave." It is hard to escape the conclusion that this is what the government of Israel intends.

Rain Delay

Much of the East Coast groaned under the weight of yet another winter storm in early February that disrupted transportation and commerce and wore down even the hardest snowbound souls. But in the meteorological West, the opposite dilemma continued to grind down California residents. A third winter of drought has produced the driest conditions in California since before the appearance of the first Spanish missions. In fact, California is well on its way to breaking 500-year precipitation trend lines. The severity of California's statewide drought is compounded by drought conditions throughout much of the West and Southwest. A winter snowpack reduced by 80 percent suggests that in the spring, snowmelt from the Rocky Mountains will fail to provide adequate recharge for the diminished Colorado River, the region's essential water source.

Conditions are so bad that California's Catholic bishops have called for divine intervention, praying for rain and for the well-being of those most at risk from a water shortage. Voluntary water rationing is leading to brown lawns across the state, cracked riverbeds and spirals of dust in the wind. Once lush farm fields in California's Central Valley are beginning to resemble desiccated moonscapes.

California's good earth produces much of the vegetables and fruits sold in supermarkets all over the United States. As growers abandon crops to the drying conditions, food prices are sure to rise. The impact will not be limited to U.S. consumers, but will be felt around the world as scarcity pushes up prices on food staples. If the drought persists into the summer, tinderbox conditions may lead to wildfires, and dust and heat themselves will become hazards to public health.

Climate researchers report that the current drought is no anomaly; in fact, the cooler and wetter conditions of the last few decades may have been the climatic oddity. Scientists have documented multiple droughts in California over the last 1,000 years. Some lasted as long as 10 or even 20 years in a row. Two mega-droughts lasted 240 and 180 years. The possibility of long-term drought conditions in the region should be a presumption of civic and agricultural policy planning. Unfortunately, as Scott Stine, a professor of geography and environmental studies at California State University, East Bay, recently told *The San Jose Mercury News*, "We continue to run California as if the longest drought we are ever going to encounter is about seven years." Californians are "living in a dream world."

The current drought offers an opportunity, albeit an

unforgiving one, to reconsider the limits of human interference with natural forces. State and federal officials will be tempted to subvert nature's ambitions with emergency interventions and water-sourcing or water-moving projects. One plan includes a 35-mile-long, \$25 billion underground tunnel system. These complex and costly efforts are front-loaded with unpredictable ecological hazards of their own. Worst of all, instead of achieving their intended purpose, water sustainability, they may ultimately bring about the opposite, as industry and agricultural interests rush in to exploit any improvement in capacity.

As the November elections approach, Congress has become eager to demonstrate its attentiveness to the California crisis in a legislative bidding war aimed at offering relief to farmers. House proposals, at least, hew to the state's tradition of water-grabbing. One idea would mean abandoning years of restoration efforts to pump unlimited amounts of water from the Sacramento-San Joaquin delta to the south, neatly pitting fish (and residents reliant on the fishing industry) against farmers and creating another in a series of stopgap measures for dealing with the regional water scarcity. But lack of rain is the underlying problem, and the days of robbing a dried-out Peter to pay off an arid Paul are coming to an end.

Instead of accelerating cycles of human intervention, the more challenging call to stewardship and sustainability demands a more patient and measured consideration of how to best build up local, sustainable water capacity. A more ecologically attuned approach would require changing habits of conservation and rain reclamation and cleaning up polluted ground basins that could "store" water in the communities where it is needed. It would require a reallocation of resources that are now diverted to water-reliant industries, reconsidering the mix of agricultural production in the region and setting limits on population and economic growth. It will mean finding a way to end a futile battle against nature that succeeds in draining fiscal reserves while briefly putting off the day of water-use reckoning.

The Catholic bishops of California asked God in prayer to "open the heavens and let His mercy rain down upon our fields and mountains." But they also prayerfully implored that political leaders seek the common good "as we learn to care and share God's gift of water for the good of all."



REPLY ALL

The Colbert Family

"Truth and Truthiness," by Patrick R. Manning (2/3), is a fine piece on Stephen Colbert. I was a fellow altar boy, schoolmate and lifelong friend of his father, James W. Colbert, M.D. A graduate of the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass., and Yale Medical School, Dr. Colbert was an intellectual and a person of faith, with a remarkable personality. He died with two of his sons, Peter and Paul, in an Eastern Airlines crash on Sept. 11, 1974.

In our years together at Iona Prep, we listened to long-playing records and discussed the new world of books: Francois Mauriac, Jacques Maritain, G. K. Chesterton, Léon Bloy and others. Later, Romano Guardini became a favorite. When Dr. Colbert was at

Yale, I occasionally visited him and his wife, Lorna. With the turbocharge of a martini or two, we resolved a number of intellectual problems, including that of alternative universes. Unfortunately, we forgot the details before we found a publisher.

It is no surprise that Stephen, the youngest of 11, is a bright light like his father. Lorna, who died this past June, was also a jewel in the family crown. They are incredible people of faith, intelligence and wit.

(MSGR.) HARRY J. BYRNE
Bronx, N.Y.

Finding a Place

Stephen Colbert and James Martin, S.J., have participated in creating a community and a voice for many who felt that there was no place for them. This is really nothing less than the work of the proclamation of the

kingdom of God. This work has been done with bravery but also with tender love and compassion (and a great dose of beautiful laughter). So now we can happily say that those who bless the poor shall themselves find blessing.

KRISTEN HOFFMASTER
Online comment

Not a 'Report'

I read with interest "Life Lessons," by James F. Keenan, S.J. (2/3), on "Humanae Vitae." I was sorry to see him perpetuating the false story that there were two reports of the papal commission, a "majority" and a "minority" report. This is not the case.

The commission produced one official report, which was presented to Pope Paul VI by the secretary of the commission. Four members found themselves unable to sign the report, so they prepared a working paper about their view. This paper was not, and was never treated as, an official "report" of the commission, nor was it presented to the pope, so far as I know.

NICHOLAS LASH
Cambridge, England

Unpersuasive Teaching

Re "Life Lessons": Essentially Pope Paul VI concluded that he and the minority grasped the truth that eluded the majority. Now we have a majority of Catholics that have not found the teaching in "Humanae Vitae" to be persuasive, and thus ignore it.

I have always held Pope Paul in high esteem, primarily because of what he said regarding the issues of justice and peace. Many found his teaching in this regard to be very persuasive, and those teachings received a positive reception from many Catholics and other people of faith. The poor reception of "Humanae Vitae" had nothing to do with the messenger but only with the message.

ROBERT STEWART
Chantilly, Va.

BLOG TALK

The following is an excerpt from "Colbert and Catechesis," by Martin E. Marty, at divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings (2/3). The post is in response to "Truth and Truthiness," by Patrick R. Manning (2/3).

"The devil should not have all the best tunes." We baroque-loving church folk like to quote that, when justifying our devotion to jazz or, though not in my case, rock music....

Now, ask: Why should the devil have all the televised comedy programs? That much on these programs is cynical or nihilistic is obvi-

ous; that something positive can also appear on them is the subject of new inquiry and publicity....

What a reach: to talk of "catechesis" or "catechists" or "catechism" in popular culture! Such terms relate to missionaries, nuns of yore, volunteer lay teachers, and overworked ministers, don't they? Today cultural historians are revisiting the catechetical scene and coming up with more positive readings than the old stereotypes permitted. What about such fields today?

MARTINE MARTY
University of Chicago



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posted below articles on **America's** Web site (americamagazine.org) and posts on Twitter and public Facebook pages. All correspondence may be edited for length and clarity.

Balanced and Charitable

Kudos to Matt Malone, S.J., the editor in chief of **America**, for publishing this thoughtful and balanced reflection on “*Humanae Vitae*.” Thanks also to James F. Keenan, S.J., for sharing his charitable approach to the encyclical.

FRANK GIBBONS
Online comment

Realities and Ideas

Perhaps Pope Francis is speaking to James F. Keenan, S.J., in the apostolic exhortation “*The Joy of the Gospel*.” The heading of a subsection reads, “Realities are more important than ideas.” Francis writes, “Realities simply are, whereas ideas are worked out.”

I first encountered “*Humanae Vitae*” on the day of its promulgation, in the company of a 29-year-old married mother of three daughters under six, one of whom had been diagnosed with neuroblastoma, a childhood cancer. For me, that reality trumped the ideas of Pope Paul VI.

I hope students at Boston College and the country’s other 27 Jesuit universities will be encouraged to spend as much time with “*The Joy of the Gospel*” as Father Keenan’s students spend with “*Humanae Vitae*.”

FRANK BERGEN
Online comment

Communication Ministry

The powerful editorial “Dignity of the Disabled” (1/20) asked us to consider how we minister to persons with disabilities and how we can provide them with the tools and services they need to live a healthy and productive life.

Imagine for a moment that you desperately want to communicate but you cannot use words. For thousands of people with aphasia, it is almost impossible to interact and communicate successfully with their families or the public on a daily basis. Startlingly, one in every 250 people in the United States has aphasia, yet few people know what it is.

While federal laws have provided

much assistance to people who live with disabilities, very often persons with aphasia are ignored, and no provisions are made to assist them. The editors write, “Too many Catholic schools and churches do not have adequate resources for people with disabilities.”

It is simple and inexpensive for faith communities to contact the National Aphasia Association and request aphasia awareness training. Teaching congregations and students how to communicate with persons with aphasia is an easily achievable way to demonstrate a “commitment to the flourishing of every individual.”

STEPHEN N. SYMBOLIK III
New York, N.Y.

The writer is a program coordinator for the National Aphasia Association.

Invisible Disabilities

The editorial “Dignity of the Disabled” quite surprised me. Most of the focus of the editorial was physical disabilities, with only a mention of mental disability and Down syndrome. I read not one word devoted to neurological disabilities like autism and other conditions on the autism spectrum. Yet today one out of every 88 children will be diagnosed with autism.

As a parent raising a daughter with autism and mental illness and a grandson with autism and several other conditions on the autism spectrum, I know that these devastating conditions are invisible and, therefore, nonexistent to many individuals and agencies. I was just surprised to count **America** among that group.

KAY POWELL
Tampa, Fla.

Counting the Dead

“A Courageous Bishop” (Current Comment, 1/6) is commendable, but the editors grossly understate the reality when they write, “Over 60,000 lives have been lost across Mexico since former President Felipe Calderón escalated the quite literal war on drugs.”

At the close of Mr. Calderón’s term in 2012, the Mexican government said that 60,000 had died. Independent sources have offered different numbers, saying that 100,000 had died; and, to date, the number of dead is over 125,000, with another 25,000 disappeared. The latter figure is what the government admits to.

The people of Mexico call for a functioning judicial system and a stop to this senseless war.

PETER C. HINDE, O.CARM.
Ciudad Juárez, Mexico

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CHILD WELFARE AND PROTECTION

Scathing UN Report Overreaches But Puts Holy See on the Defensive

Bureaucratic overreach, a fundamental misunderstanding of the interplay of canon law with secular authority, a headline-grabbing “food fight”: these are just some of the criticisms of a recent broadside from a United Nations committee reviewing the Vatican’s global record on the protection of children. A crucial error in a scathing report from the U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child was its presumption that the Holy See maintains something akin to a secular government’s control over its “territory,” which according to this interpretation is not confined to the borders of Vatican City but encompasses the worldwide Catholic Church itself.

Revisiting several well-publicized instances of clerical or religious wrongdoing—some dating back decades—the committee, which tracks compliance with the U.N.’s Convention on the Rights of the Child, charged that the Vatican, a signatory state, was not doing enough to prevent clerical sexual abuse of children. It even suggested that, for the good of children, the Catholic Church should change its teaching on abortion and contraception. Among a laundry list of sometimes oddly explicit recommendations, the committee requested that the Vatican prohibit interpretations of Scripture that might be used to justify corporal punishment and urged a review of textbooks in Catholic schools to rid them of gender stereotyping.

An international law specialist and a keen observer of the proceedings in Europe called the outcome of the sometimes contentious process a missed opportunity for the United Nations to put real pressure on the Holy See regarding its policies on the protection of children. “They got their hits in for the news cycle,” the attorney said, “but they didn’t make progress along the lines of the [convention itself], and the Holy See wasn’t put in a position where it could respond in a constructive way” to criticism. That crucial opening would have set the foundation for future dialogue and progress. Now the tension engendered by the report could impede the diplomatic engagement necessary to maintain momentum toward the child protection and rights goals of the convention.

The attorney, who wished to remain anonymous, said because the U.N. report drifted so far afield of the param-

eters of the convention itself, it will be easy for Vatican authorities to dismiss its findings if they wish to do so. “They thought that they were going to shame the Holy See before the entire world,” the attorney told *America*. And in so doing, “they overstepped their mandate.”

Had the committee instead focused on pushing for compliance with international norms on child protection within the Holy See’s actual territorial confines—through which thousands of children pass each day—the attorney argued it could have had a meaningful impact on the global church. Imagine, for example, if officials at the Holy See adopted the same kinds of training and protection policies now commonly enforced in dioceses, seminaries and schools across the United States? That powerful example of attentiveness to child safety and preventative interventions against child abuse



would be difficult for bishops’ conferences around the world to ignore.

The Vatican will follow the procedures foreseen by the treaty “with openness to criticisms that are justified, but it will do so with courage and determination, without timidity,” said Federico Lombardi, S.J., the Vatican spokesperson, on Feb. 7, two days after the U.N. report made global headlines. Committee members went “beyond their competence and interfered in the doctrinal and moral positions of the Catholic Church,” Father Lombardi said, adding that its suggestions reveal an “ideological vision of sexuality.”

The Vatican, Father Lombardi said, has repeatedly explained in detail to the committee and to other U.N. agencies that it has direct legal jurisdiction only over those who live and work in the small territory of Vatican City State. While it has canonical and spiritual jurisdiction over Catholics around



DOCUMENTS DELAYED. A news conference following the release of Chicago archdiocesan files on past cases of clergy sexual abuse, Jan. 21.

the world, priests and bishops are subject to the laws of their own nations.

“Is this impossible to understand, or do they not want to understand it,” he asked. “In both cases, one has a right to be surprised.”

KEVIN CLARKE

LATIN AMERICA

Pope Francis Challenges New Leaders

Construction of facilities in Brazil for the 2014 FIFA World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games were in full swing last year when a wave of street protests swept through the country.

“We want a soccer association-style hospital,” read one demonstrator’s sign, a reference to the quality of the local

government health center compared with the new structures going up for the sporting event.

That sentiment is symptomatic of a deeper discontent taking shape around Latin America as a decade-long economic boom slows down and voters in about half the region’s countries prepare to elect national presidents this year. In countries newly emerged from the ranks of the poor—where a burgeoning middle class is buying new cars and running up credit-card debt as shopping malls and high-rise apartment buildings alter the urban skylines—the seven heads of state elected in 2014 will wrestle with many of the challenges that Pope Francis has warned about over the past year.

Looming largest on the list are “inequalities and inclusion of all members of society,” said Roxana Barrantes, an economics professor at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru, who also heads the Institute of Peruvian Studies, a social sciences research center in Lima. “In many countries in Latin America, people are openly questioning the high degree of inequality in income distribution and in opportunities for people who [traditionally] have

been excluded, particularly original peoples,” Barrantes said.

Recent years of economic upheaval in the United States and Europe brought boom times to Latin America, as financial investment in the region rose and countries profited from high international prices for commodities like minerals and oil.

The bonanza galvanized domestic economies and lifted many people above the poverty line for the first time in decades. By 2012, the proportion living in poverty had dropped to 28 percent. But 164 million people—a figure roughly equal to half the U.S. population—still live on the bare minimum needed to survive.

The benefits of the economic boom have varied from country to country—nearly half of all Salvadorans still live in poverty, compared with 7 percent of Uruguayans—and within countries, where poverty rates and the lack of job and educational opportunities are highest in rural areas and among indigenous people. Perhaps most telling are the figures for income inequality. Nearly half the region’s income goes to the wealthiest 20 percent of the population, while the poorest 20 percent



SOCCKER WARS. Riot Police tangle with Brazilians protesting excessive spending on the 2014 FIFA World Cup in July 2013.

receive only 5 percent.

Pope Francis had that in mind when he told political and business leaders at January's World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, "The successes which have been achieved, even if they have reduced poverty for a great number of people, often have led to a widespread social exclusion."

He had already warned about the serious consequences of those disparities. "Until exclusion and inequality in society and between peoples are reversed, it will be impossible to eliminate violence," the pope wrote in his first apostolic exhortation, "Evangelii Gaudium."

"Just as the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say 'thou shalt not' to an economy of exclusion and inequality," he wrote.

U.S. Abortion Rate Down

Almost two weeks after the national March for Life rally in Washington, D.C., the Guttmacher Institute reported a 13 percent drop in national abortion rates between 2008 and 2011, making for the lowest rate since 1973, when abortion on demand was legalized in the United States. "No evidence was found," however, according to Guttmacher, of a correlation between the declining rate and new abortion restrictions established between 2008 and 2011. The study was released on Feb. 3. Carol Tobias, president of the National Right to Life Committee, stated that the declining numbers "shows the long-term efforts of the right-to-life movement," even though Guttmacher researchers gave no credit to groups against abortion. Legislative efforts and pro-life campaigns "should not be minimized when

NEWS BRIEFS

An emotional Cardinal Luis Tagle of Manila, Philippines, welcomed U.S. Catholic leaders on Feb. 3 to review **recovery efforts after Typhoon Haiyan**, saying that the work to rebuild devastated communities can show the world a church united in the service of people in need. + A statement released by the Legion of Christ on Feb. 6 expressed "deep sorrow" for the late Rev. Marcial Maciel Degollado's "**reprehensible and objectively immoral behavior**" and expressed regret over the congregation's "long institutional silence" in response to accusations against him. + A **Catholic adoption agency in Scotland** on Jan. 31 won an appeal that allows it to remain open without assessing gay couples as possible adopters and foster parents. + As horror stories continued to be told by Syrian refugees reaching Jordan, Russian officials reported on Feb. 7 that a three-day ceasefire had been accepted by government and opposition forces to allow civilians to **evacuate the Syrian city of Homs** and supplies of humanitarian aid to reach those who choose to remain. + An Israeli Supreme court ruling on Feb. 3 at least temporarily halted the construction of a **controversial security barrier** that threatens to cut off Christians in the Cremisan Valley, near the West Bank city of Beit Jalla.



Homs, Syria

discussing the decline in abortion numbers," Tobias said in an N.R.L.C. news article. According to Guttmacher, "more effective contraceptive methods" may have contributed to the decline in unintended pregnancies, thus causing a decline in abortions. The study reported 16.9 abortions per 1,000 women age 15 to 44 in 2011, totaling almost 1.1 million abortions that year. The rate of abortion in the United States peaked in 1981, with nearly 30 abortions per 1,000 women.

The Survey Says...

Reports from bishops' conferences in Germany and Switzerland show a clear divergence between what the church teaches on marriage, sexuality and family life and what Catholics—even those active in parish life—personally believe. The differences are seen "above all when it comes to pre-mar-

ital cohabitation, [the status of the] divorced and remarried, birth control and homosexuality," said the German bishops' report, posted on Feb. 3 on their conference website in German, Italian and English. The text is a summary of the official responses from all of Germany's 27 dioceses and about 20 German Catholic organizations and institutions to a Vatican questionnaire published in preparation for October's Synod of Bishops on the family. The Swiss bishops' conference published an initial report on Feb. 4 based on 25,000 responses, similar in most cases to those received by the German bishops. "Most of the baptized have an image of the church that, on the one hand, is family friendly in its attitude while at the same time considering its sexual morality to be unrealistic," the German survey found.

From CNS and other sources.



A Mercy-Filled Lent

The feeling can best be described as last-minute, Lenten panic. It typically hits in those final hours of Mardi Gras, when it dawns on me that I must soon settle on a Lenten sacrifice. And then, moments later, my worry quickly subsides as I fall back on that old favorite—forgoing sweets—and tuck in to a pre-Lenten bowl of ice cream as though it were my final meal in prison.

Pope Francis' Lenten message, released in early February, suggests that I may need to take a more deliberate approach to sacrifice during this season. That his brief but powerful statement arrived a month prior to Ash Wednesday is not insignificant. This timing gives us a chance to digest the message before Lent begins, and to discern how we might prepare for the season. We are meant to approach Lent deliberately, to enter into it willingly and to reconsider how our own sacrifices might offer greater understanding of Christ's sacrifice. And this process, in turn, is meant to extend into our daily lives long after Easter has passed. Giving up sweets can be a part of this process, but it shouldn't be all of it.

Lent offers us a chance to consider prayerfully our relationship with God. And Scripture offers a few suggestions for how we might do this. Some of the most powerful are the corporal works of mercy. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says that those who will inherit the kingdom are those who gave him food when he was hungry and drink when he was thirsty and those who visited him in prison. "Whatever you

did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me," he advised (25:40).

The corporal works of mercy are feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, visiting the sick, visiting the imprisoned and burying the dead. These actions are powerful for a number of reasons. One is that these works force us to recognize Christ in our neighbors—even in neighbors we may not like or may be wary of. They remind us that Christ is found in unexpected places and unlikely or vulnerable people. The works of mercy remind us that we must be open to the God of surprises.

Second, these works remind us that Christ works through us. We are called to reach out to others and, through God's grace, to build the kingdom of God on earth. It is easy to think that we will do these things eventually, that we can start to serve others when work settles down or our lives become less busy. But the Lenten season calls us to make time now and to start, even in small ways, paying attention to where Christ leads us.

Third, the corporal works of mercy remind us that we can grow in our relationship with Christ by building up and being part of an active community of loving, giving people here on earth. These works remind us that we are part of the body of Christ and that being a part of that community comes with both great gifts and great challenges.

In his message, Pope Francis distinguishes between different kinds of

poverty—material, moral and spiritual destitution. The church urges us to consider all of these. This means that we are called not only to perform acts of charity and to work toward systemic change, but also to build relationships. Together we help our neighborhoods, cities and world to move toward greater solidarity with the poor and to create a more just world. And that is not always easy, as Pope Francis reminds

us. "I distrust a charity that costs nothing and does not hurt," he says. Being merciful sometimes means being uncomfortable.

In his message, Francis points out that the life of Jesus is an example of the kind of poverty to which we are all called. The poverty Christ chooses is not

"for its own sake" but the means by which he joins us in our suffering even as he lifts us out of it. In fact, Jesus is rich in knowing his father's love. The only true poverty, Francis says, is found in those who are "not living as children of God." Therefore, justice for the poor cannot be accomplished through a single act, but must stem from a mentality of mercy. Our work with and on behalf of those who are poor or vulnerable is part of a continual process.

Pope Francis reminds us that "the ministers of the church must be ministers of mercy above all." He makes it a priority, and he calls on us to do the same. The works of mercy help us move away from that last-minute mentality and toward a purposeful, prayerful approach, not only to Lent, but to the rest of our lives.

Being
merciful
sometimes
means
being
uncomfortable.

KERRY WEBER, *managing editor of America*, is the author of *Mercy in the City* (Loyola Press).



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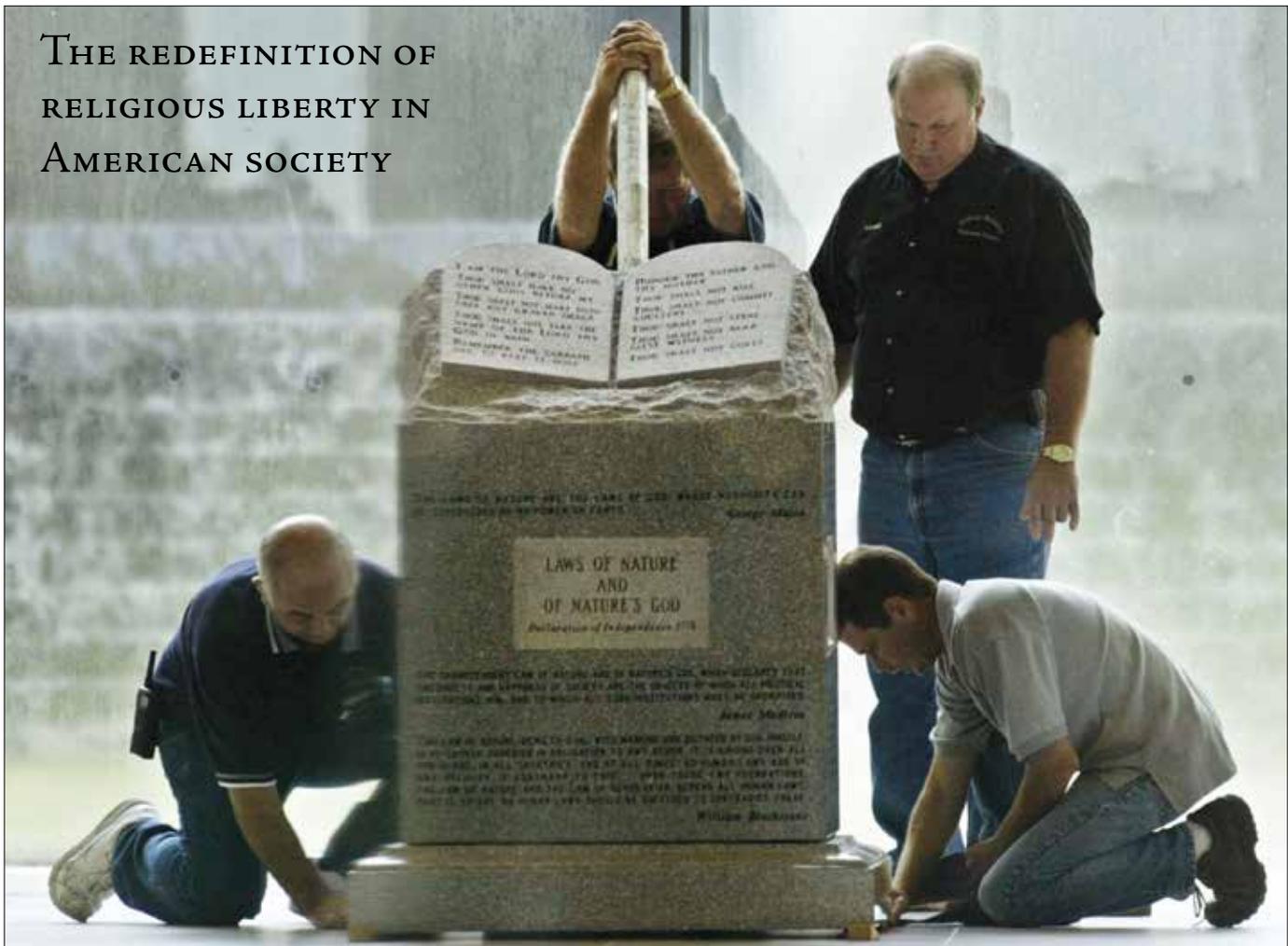


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Our Secular Future

BY R. R. RENO

Americans are rightly proud of our tradition of religious liberty. The founders recognized that religious convictions cut very deeply into the soul, making people capable of great sacrifices—and often stimulating bitter conflicts and terrible persecutions. Thus we have the First Amendment and its definition of the first freedom: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

We need to recognize, however, that our approach to religious freedom has in fact changed a great deal in the more than 200 years of national history. These changes reflect shifts in the overarching religious consensus in the United States. By my reading of the signs of the times, this consensus is changing yet again. The shift foretells a renegotiation and redefinition of the nature and scope of religious liberty—one that I fear will not favor religious believers.

Historical Context

There have been three main phases or agreements about religious liberty in our country. The first was a federalism that recognized local forms of establishment but wished to keep the

GOD-LESS.
Workers remove a
Ten Commandments
monument from
the Alabama
Judicial Building in
Montgomery
in 2003.

R. R. RENO is editor of *First Things* and a former professor of theological ethics at Creighton University in Omaha, Neb.

national government out of the religion business. The second corresponded to the long century of ecumenical Protestant hegemony that naturally intertwined itself with state power. And the third, which followed the Second World War, has been characterized by a move toward religious neutrality.

Phase One. At the time the Constitution was written, the Congregational Church was established in Massachusetts and Connecticut, and it received public support from tax revenue. In Georgia and South Carolina, the Anglican or Episcopal Church was established. It was not until *Everson v. Board of Education* in 1947 that the Supreme Court stipulated that non-establishment and free exercise applied to the states as well as the federal government. Nevertheless, soon after the nation was founded, elite opinion consolidated around a view that government should remain at a distance from religion. This consensus had two sources: one focused on the rights of individual conscience and the other on the integrity of the church as an independent institution.

This position led to disestablishment in the states, culminating with Massachusetts in 1830. It is important to recognize, however, that this consensus was very pro-religion. Political and cultural leaders did not want any particular denomination to have privileged access to state power, but they were in favor of a religious society and thus a religiously inspired public culture. Or, to be more accurate, they were in favor of a Protestant society and a Protestant-inspired government.

Phase Two. By the time of crusading Abolitionism and the formation of the Republican Party in 1854, the ascendancy of a pan-Protestant consensus was in full swing. It reached its high point with Prohibition. A person can still find public monuments in many American cities dedicated to the crusade against demon rum. They often feature an expanded list of theological virtues: faith, hope, love—and temperance. The insertion of “under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954 was a late, defensive expression of the power of this consensus, which was already being challenged by a new secularism.

The Protestant consensus encouraged anti-Catholicism in culture as well as law. In 1875 President Ulysses S. Grant urged the creation of public schools “unmixed with sectarian, pagan or atheistical dogmas.” Non-sectarian and non-atheistical meant schools that could be trusted to inculcate American values, meaning generic and non-dogmatic Protestant values, which were considered the finest expression of true freedom. Here religious freedom means the freedom to be a generic Protestant, with Catholicism grudgingly tolerated at best, and Mormons subject to intense persecu-

tion. The courts interpreted religious freedom accordingly.

The Protestant consensus became more capacious as the 20th century wore on. After World War II it expanded to include Judaism and Catholicism, and we came to think of ourselves as a religious nation committed to Judeo-Christian values. But as the religious consensus expanded, it also eroded. Influential writers like H. L. Mencken mocked religious believers, reflecting an increasingly confident and outspoken view that religion—especially traditional Christianity—is a social liability that hinders progress. Many factors contributed to this emerging opinion. The abject failure of Prohibition soured many on Protestantism’s crusading spirit. Newly emerging Protestant fundamentalism was self-consciously antagonistic and reflected an anti-establishment populism. For many the threat to society changed. Whatever their personal beliefs, the founders thought religion good for society and atheism a threat. By contrast, for someone like Mr. Mencken or Clarence Darrow or Margaret Sanger, religion was the problem.

Phase Three. Our constitutional interpretation came to reflect this new development. It shifted toward an ideal of religious neutrality. The Supreme Court decision in 1947 that applied the prohibition of religious establishment to the states led to the development of a complex set of legal rules limiting the role of religion in public life.

Law professors rightly seek to clarify this jurisprudence, but for our purposes I think a broad but largely accurate simplification will suffice: our constitutional law concerning religious liberty sought to secure an orderly separation of religion from the social influence the Protestant era had encouraged. This separation has helped protect small religious minorities from undue public control, but the major emphasis has been on restraining the influence of religious majorities.

Preoccupations with prayer at high school graduation ceremonies provide the most obvious example. The court has been eager to protect the tender conscience of the lonely, unbelieving student from the supposedly great social pressures of an anodyne interdenominational prayer by a local pastor. The danger is not that a hardline Calvinist will impose his doctrines on wishy-washy Methodists, which the founders worried about. Instead, the court after World War II reflected a broader concern that believers of all stripes are too predominant and therefore make unbelievers feel uncomfortable and excluded. Freedom of religion therefore means the option of being free from religion. I believe this emphasis will characterize the next phase of our history: the

Traditional Christianity and churchgoing no longer define the social consensus in the United States.

“Let us try also to be a church
that finds new roads, that is able
to step outside itself.”

—Pope Francis



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shift from individual freedom from religion to a vision of society as a whole free from religious influence.

The Anti-Religious Cohort

Over the last few decades the Mencken cohort has grown. In the 1950s around 3 percent of Americans checked the “none” box in surveys asking about religious affiliation. Now 20 percent of the population does so. Moreover, these so-called “nones” are heavily represented in elite culture. A recent report on family life from the University of Virginia’s Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture identifies parents they call the “engaged progressives.” Representing 21 percent of parents, this group is the most highly educated and most influential. It overlaps with the nones. Fewer than 20 percent in this group go to church regularly. More than half never attend.

In itself this demographic change need not foretell dramatic changes in law. A significant segment of Americans who do not go to church might support the now established postwar trend toward religious neutrality: the belief that the country needs to make space for unbelievers and not presume their adherence to a religious consensus, however vague. But the nones and engaged progressives are not just irreligious. They are often anti-religious and eager to limit the influence of traditional Christianity.

As the study observes, engaged progressive parents value tolerance and diversity, but their overall moral outlook puts them at odds with many religious people. Nones and engaged progressives overwhelming support abortion and gay marriage, for example. They are also highly partisan; an overwhelming majority vote for liberal candidates and have thus become a key pillar of the Democratic Party. This moral and political profile makes them hostile to traditional religion. The study explains: “The only type of diversity that engaged progressives might tacitly oppose within their children’s friendship network would be a born-again Christian.”

The anti-religious instinct of this cohort came into the open during the last election cycle. Delegates to the Democratic National Convention notoriously struck the word *God* from the party platform, only to have it halfheartedly restored by anxious party leaders. During the election the talking points included attacking the Republican “war on women.” This well-crafted slogan was designed to rally the nones, the secular base that is now the largest identifiable constituency in the Democratic Party.

Institutions of cultural authority tell us what is good and respectable—and what is bad and shameful. It is now crushingly obvious that this machinery, which can include museums, universities, foundations or mainstream media, reflects many of the values of the nones and engaged progressives. From their point of view, traditional Christianity is quaint when confined to exotic liturgies or remote Amish commu-

nities, but it most certainly should not influence the future of American culture and politics.

This shift toward antagonism cannot help but affect our attitudes toward religious liberty. Our Constitution accords rights to the people, and the courts cannot void them willy-nilly. Therefore, unless the Constitution is amended, there will always be a prohibition of establishment and a right of free exercise. But history shows that the Constitution is a plastic document. When elite culture thinks something is bad for society as a whole, judges find ways to suppress it. In the late 19th century, for example, the First Amendment offered no protection for Mormons. In 1890 the Supreme Court upheld the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887, legislation that prohibited polygamy and dissolved the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and confiscated its property.

Trends in Jurisprudence

Not surprisingly, law professors today who view traditional Christianity as a social threat are beginning to theorize changes to the law. I see three trends. The first and most obvious involves what I have called the Selma analogy: the equation of gay liberation with the historic struggle for civil rights for black Americans. The second shifts from freedom of religion to freedom of worship. The third hopes to redefine religious liberty as a general liberty of conscience.

The civil rights laws adopted in the 1960s were designed to bulldoze racism out of American public life, and the Selma analogy prepares the way for a narrowing of religious freedom by equating dissent from progressive values with discrimination. Proponents of gay rights, for example, believe the freedom of religious individuals and institutions should be limited if they do not conform to the new consensus about sexual morality.

Some judges already agree. In 2008 the New Mexico Human Rights Commission determined that wedding photographers violated the state’s anti-discrimination law by refusing to photograph a lesbian commitment ceremony. The photographers, Elaine and Jonathan Huguenin, appealed to the New Mexico Supreme Court, arguing that their religious views about marriage prevented them from photographing the ceremony. The court was not sympathetic. It applied what is called the “public accommodation doctrine” of civil rights law: those offering services to the general public may not discriminate. This doctrine overrides a great deal of what we think of as religious liberty.

In a concurring opinion Justice Richard C. Bosson put it clearly: “The Huguenins are free to think, to say, to believe, as they wish; they may pray to the God of their choice and follow those commandments in their personal lives wherever they lead,” but “in the smaller, more focused world of the marketplace, of commerce, of public accommodation,” they have to abide by anti-discrimination laws. This is “the price

of citizenship,” he wrote. Apparently this price includes the violation of religious conscience when it comes to gay rights, which makes it seem that religious freedom is only allowed in the privacy of home or the precincts of church.

The shift toward a private, personal freedom that lacks space for public expression has become prominent in the ways the Obama administration talks about religious freedom. The International Religious Freedom Act of 1988 sought to make religious freedom a diplomatic priority. The current administration consistently reframes this priority as freedom of worship. The shift in language is understandable. The United States has many allies in the Muslim world for whom anything like our approach to religious liberty is at best a remote possibility. For different reasons the same is the case in China and elsewhere. The danger, however, is that this narrow understanding of religious freedom will gain traction in our domestic debates and become another way for legal theorists to argue for a minimal interpretation of the First Amendment.

The Selma analogy and the diminution of religious liberty to a bare freedom of worship represent two ways to redefine the First Amendment. Added to these, I see a third and more dramatic threat: today some law professors ask why religious people should get special rights in the first place. Why should a Catholic or a Baptist or a Hindu get special constitutional protection, but not a committed utilitarian or ardent

socialist? Evoking the principle of fairness, some now argue that the conscience of every person needs legal protection, not just consciences formed by religious traditions. Thus the First Amendment needs to be reinterpreted to provide freedom of conscience, not freedom of religion.

This mentality is libertarian and is gaining traction, not the least because it seems to expand rather than limit freedom. (Even representatives of the church can sometimes seem to imply this when they focus on conscience.) But the promise of expansion is an illusion. Libertarianism theorizes an unworkable system: If the conscience of every person must be equally respected, then we will have freedom of conscience only when nothing important is at stake.

There is no guarantee that our legal culture will follow the trajectories I have outlined. Judges are influenced by good legal arguments, and the defenders of religious freedom today may succeed in breaking down the Selma analogy and reverse the trend to attenuate religious freedom by redefining it as freedom of worship. The current membership of the U.S. Supreme Court has shown itself very firmly aligned with a robust approach to religious freedom. There are reasons to be hopeful in the near term. But history shows that the rule of law generally reflects what the social consensus believes is conducive to the common good. The law ministers to culture, not the other way around. The nones and other progressives are frustrated by the influence of traditional

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Christianity over American society. This makes me pessimistic about the medium and long term.

The Heart of the Conflict

To be blunt: Religious people who hold traditional values are in the way of what many powerful people want. We are in the way of widespread acceptance of abortion, unrestricted embryonic stem cell research and experimentation with fetal tissue. We are in the way of doctor-assisted suicide, euthanasia and the mercy-killing of genetically defective infants. We are in the way of new reproductive technologies, which will become more important as our society makes sex more sterile. We are in the way of gay rights and the redefinition of marriage. We are in the way of the nones and the engaged progressives and their larger goal of deconstructing traditional moral limits so that they can be reconstructed in accord with their vision of the future.

Traditional religious people are in the way, and many of our fellow Americans are doing their best to push us out of the way. The outspoken among us have been largely expelled from higher education and other institutions of cultural authority. This exclusion should not surprise us. Traditional Christianity and churchgoing no longer define the social

consensus in the United States. The Protestant era is over, and in its demise we have not seen the Catholic moment that the Rev. Richard John Neuhaus, founder of First Things, hoped for. Instead, we seem to be heading into the secular moment, which is almost certain to find ways to redefine religious liberty, or at least try.

In Islamic states, a *dhimmi* is a non-Muslim who is tolerated, but whose social existence is carefully circumscribed to ensure no threat to Muslim dominance. Have we reached

the point at which our secular elites envision something similar for religious people with traditional values? We will be free to worship, but not to run universities or hospitals or social service agencies in accord with our principles. We will be free

to believe as we wish, but not to run our businesses in accord with our beliefs. We will be permitted to exist as long as we do not openly challenge the progressive consensus.

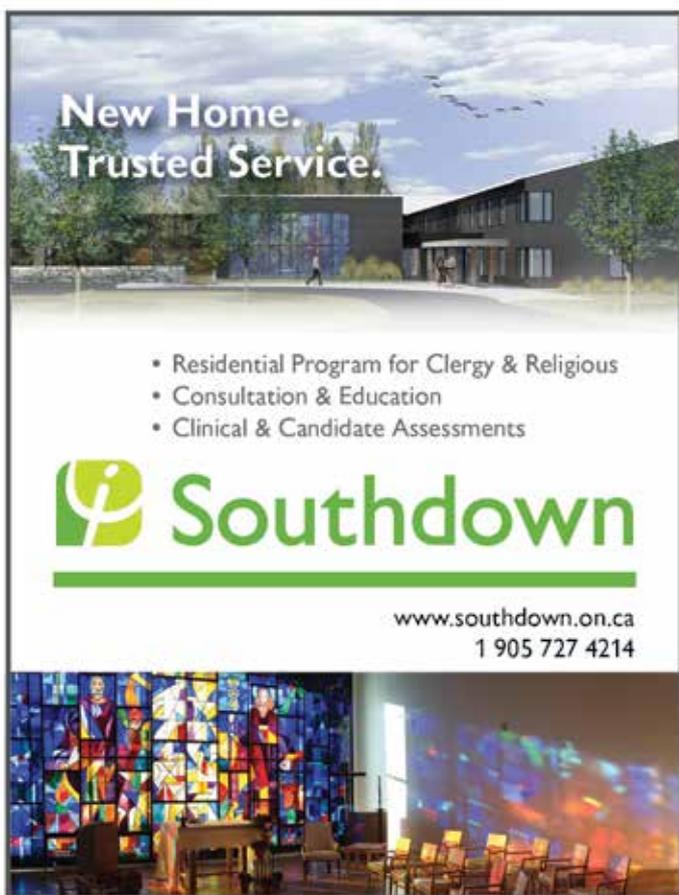
Religious people need to support the good legal minds fighting for our freedom, but it is even more important that we fight against the temptation to accept *dhimmitude*. Yes, antagonism toward traditional Christianity is now common in our ruling class. One prejudice warmly approved by many secularists is that against so-called fundamentalists. But we need to remember that the secular moment does not correspond to religious decline. The committed core of believers, defined as those who attend church every Sunday, has remained remarkably constant for the last 50 years at between 25 to 35 percent of the population in the United States. Furthermore, the secular moment has no grassroots legacy to compare with the scope and commitment of the pro-life and home-schooling movements.

It is appropriate to conclude, therefore, with words of encouragement. Last summer a young Dominican brother studying for the priesthood served as an intern for First Things. He is an impressive man, one of a remarkable cohort of 20 who entered the Dominican Friars of the Province of St. Joseph a few years ago to begin formation. As I walked with him on the streets of New York City, I noticed that people often stare at his white, ankle-length outfit. Unlike the often-wild fashion statements that people parade as great expressions of protest or individuality but blend into the city as just another pose or posture, his simple habit represents something dangerously real. People intuit, however dimly, that he embodies a vision of the future that collides with the spirit of our age, and does so with frightening force.

Seeing these reactions I was reminded that our faith goes deep, very deep. And as the guardian and servant of this faith the church has tremendous power. As I contemplate the coming battles over religious freedom, I am consoled by this thought: Our secular challengers are right, very right, to see our faith as a dangerous and disruptive dissent. 

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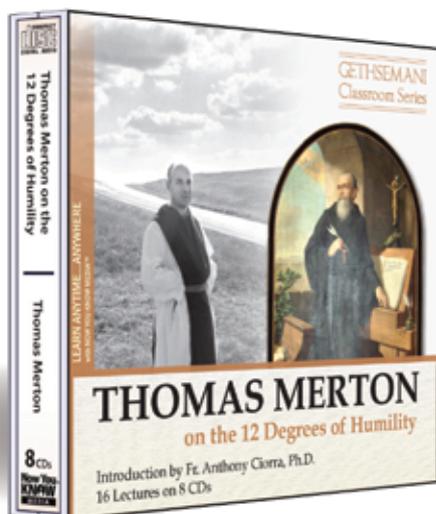
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A View From Abroad

The shrinking common ground in the American church

BY MASSIMO FAGGIOLI

It is very difficult for European Catholics to make sense of the polarization within the Catholic Church in the United States. I grew up in Northern Italy and studied and worked for almost 20 years at the University of Bologna, my alma mater and the oldest university in Europe, founded in 1088. In the second half of the 20th century, the Catholic Church in Western Europe existed within a political environment split between strong Socialist and Communist Parties and an equally strong Christian-Democratic Party, which was strongly supported by the church. Not all Catholics voted for this party, however; in fact, the percentage of Catholics who were members of the Christian-Democratic Party had been steadily declining.

Today this party exists with the same political relevance of 60 years ago only in Germany.

Despite this political polarization in these European countries, the tension did not result in theological polarization among Catholics. In the political and cultural environment of the 1960s, when European Catholicism still set the standard for world Catholicism, the Second Vatican Council represented (especially in Italy) an opening, a kind of thaw, that made it possible to build bridges among different political cultures. So to me, as a Catholic, a scholar and a recent immigrant to the United States, the issue of polarization within Catholicism in this country—a country with historical and political experience so unlike Europe—is important.

It is worthwhile, first of all, to remember that it is a very recent development for the Catholic magisterium to accept the idea that Catholics can have a political culture, much less different political cultures. The Catholic march toward democracy was a long one. After the shock of the revolutions of the late 18th and mid-19th centuries, politics was seen as the result of the separation of the modern world from the moral guidance of the one true church. Catholic politicians were allowed to do business with the modern world



PHOTO: CNS PHOTO/MICHAEL ALEXANDER, GEORGIA BULLETIN

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only de facto, as a practical necessity, because for the church hierarchy it seemed too embarrassing to be directly involved with a political realm they did not acknowledge as legitimate. In many cases, however, embarrassment was overcome, and the international politics of the Vatican trumped the political orientations of Catholics. The rise of Italian Fascism, for example, resulted in part from the fact that Catholics were not allowed to have political cultures or a political party of their own.

Only during Vatican II did the church recognize that modernity exists and that Catholics live not only in the church, but also in society and in political communities that in many places had recently become democratic. This was one of the “signs of the times.” A fundamental call to unity, both ecumenical and interreligious, helped inspire the Second Vatican Council. The fathers and theologians of the Council recognized in modernity a moment of advancement toward unity, and they saw the church as one of the agents for the promotion of this unity. The council also renewed Catholic engagement in politics by elaborating a set of principles that Catholics should follow in a democratic public arena. The goal of democracy, according to Vatican II, is not procedural but must be measured by its ability to meet the demands of a human dignity the church proclaims as closely connected to the “social nature” of the human person.

Domestic Challenges

In light of the extraordinary past year for the Catholic Church, we must ask whether the election of Pope Francis might signal an end to the polarization within the church in the United States. The resignation of Pope Benedict XVI marks the end of popes who were involved in the debates at Vatican II. As the broader ecclesial context shifts, however, Catholics in the United States continue to live and work within the political and cultural structures of this country, which

have both contributed to a vibrant and important church and have also produced a few challenges that will continue to affect the intra-Catholic debate in the United States. Here I will list a few issues relevant to the polarization I see in this country.

The Constitution. The free exercise and non-establishment clauses of the First Amendment allow for an interesting interplay between religion and politics in the United States. The political views of an individual often relate closely to his or her religious views and vice versa. Many denominations in the United States have experienced a history of adjustment and change according to the always evolving relationship between political and religious views, and Catholics in the United States are not above this phenomenon.

The internal debate. The second largest religious group in United States is former Catholics. Notwithstanding the ever growing size of what Martin E. Marty called “the American Catholic Alumni Society,” Catholics in this country have not left the church at the same rate as European Catholics. In other words, the rise of a critical mass against—or at least questioning—the institutional church has become part of



the internal debate within Catholicism. In Europe, the debate is characterized as pitting a clergy-led Catholicism against a more secular landscape.

Competitive democracy. From its beginning the church in the United States has lived in close contact with democracy, and a democratic ethos has become part of its culture. But the United States offers a particular type of democratic environment. Democracy here is not consensual, as it is in European democracies with multiparty alliances; it is competitive—that is, there are two alternative political parties. This environment has affected the ethos of participation in the church, which is often driven by competitive, oppositional views more than by consensual instincts. Ecclesial actors (hierarchy, laity, theologians, Catholic think tanks, universities and so forth) take part in this interaction as competitors. This analysis also clarifies why the “non-negotiable values” became more important among Catholics in the United States than anywhere else. Some bishops explicitly criticized the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, founded by Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago in 1996 to help facilitate dialogue among Catholics who hold different political and theological perspectives. Today the function of consensus-building has been visibly lacking at all levels of the church in the United States.

Political cultures. There are many scholarly studies on the impact of electoral systems on the political behavior of a country, and the political behavior of Catholics in the United States, but there are very few on the impact of the electoral system on the political cultures of Catholics in a given country. In simple terms, the existence of a two-party political and electoral system has given birth in these last few decades (among other factors) to something resembling a two-party Catholic Church. In countries where Catholics live in multiparty systems, different theological identities are much more difficult to absorb into the political discourse and partisan narratives, so the church is not as divided.

Political labels. The increasing political polarization in the United States has only exacerbated the political divide within the church. In U.S. politics, Republican means conservative, and Democrat means liberal. This dichotomy is clearly felt in how Catholics engage with each other about issues in the church. Those who invoke Vatican II are labeled “liberal,” and it is “conservative” to refer to the magisterium. Of course, this dichotomy is only possible if we accept an extremely simplified (and more political than theological) understanding of an ecumenical council and the teaching of the church.

This kind of polarization among Catholics is not present in Europe. In most European countries with a large Catholic population, political compromise—in the noblest sense of the word—has always been part of the political reception of the magisterial documents of the teaching office of the church—for example, in the excommunication of Communists in 1949 and its impact on Italy, and the reception of “*Humanae Vitae*” (1968) and other teachings on the so-called life issues.

Temptation and Opportunity

In the face of an extremely polarized and paralyzed political life in the United States, I understand the temptation for a Catholic retrenchment into an alternative structure—a move from political engagement with the state or government into a world of small communities—more traditional

and radical than what conventional politics offers Catholics today. There is an acutely perceived political homelessness among Catholics in the United States, and I greatly admire the conviction of Catholics who want to rebuild ecclesial communities and local

networks of social services, a vision expressed in the pages of *America* by theologians like William T. Cavanaugh (“The Root of Evil,” 7/29/2013) and Michael Baxter (“Murray’s Mistake,” 9/23/2013).

The political challenges in the United States, however, cannot justify withdrawal by Catholics from the *polis* as we know it. Following this path entails many problems. First, a withdrawal from the affairs of the nation-state might lead Catholics in the United States to something like the early communities of Christians; but in a European context, where there have been established churches, a withdrawal from the nation-state risks a return to the wars of religion that ravaged Europe for at least a century. Second, a retrenchment of Catholicism in the form of resistance against the modern state implies a radical rethinking of the Catholic view of the “political,” which paradoxically augments the “Americanist” taste of Catholicism and makes the polarization even more serious. And third, a retrenchment would move Catholicism intellectually and spiritually toward a sectarian mind-set that is impossible to reconcile with the “universal” claim at the heart of Catholicism.

As a historian, I do not need to be convinced of the destructiveness of public power and its temptation to absorb every aspect of life in a manner that is not even comparable to the times of the empires. Nevertheless, I also believe that the modern state is the last anchor against much more de-

Today the function of consensus-building has been visibly lacking at all levels of the church in the United States.

structive forces, and I fear that Catholic theology might soon become the victim of an anti-political sentiment that contradicts recent papal teaching about service in political life. In “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” Pope Francis writes, “Politics, though often denigrated, remains a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good.” This endeavor is worth the investment of the whole church.

The quest for a new common ground in the church serves as the best possible response to Catholics tempted to retreat from the *polis*. Perhaps in this new papacy the Catholic Common Ground Initiative can play a renewed role in our ecclesial discourse. In other words, this papacy might signal an end to the culture wars. At least it will be more difficult to wage culture wars and claim that such actions embody a faithful reception of papal teaching. Pope Francis has clearly rejected any attempt to turn the Gospel into an ideology, and he is equally distant from an “Americanist” view of Catholicism. As a “social Catholic,” Pope Francis has stepped back from issues that have frequently divided Catholics into two camps, like the use of the triad abortion/contraception/homosexuality as a test for entering, staying in or leaving the church; the weaponization of sacraments; and the ideologization of the Catholic tradition as “conservative” or “liberal.”

Fifteen years ago, Cardinal Francis George of Chicago

famously said, “Liberal Catholicism is an exhausted project.” No one expects Pope Francis to refer to any part of the church as an “exhausted project,” but his social radicalism is surely exhausting the spin doctors active in various Catholic think tanks who expect him to endorse a full slate of their positions. In this time of change in the church, the rediscovery of a common ground is necessary, especially as some Catholics attached to the social-political language of the last two pontificates find it difficult to articulate, under Pope Francis, a language for their “faithful dissent” from the magisterium of the church.

The crisis of the engagement of many Catholics in politics is one of the symptoms of the crisis of the idea of politics as one of the highest forms of charity, because it serves the common good. But

the Catholic Church is one of the last defenders of the potentially humanizing effect of politics, and of the potentially dehumanizing effect of a community of Christians closing in on itself. The question for Catholics is not whether to engage with the state and one another, but what defines this engagement. The particular challenge for Catholics in the United States is to overcome the temptation to see everything as a competition between two camps, whether in politics or among Catholics. The election of Pope Francis is perhaps the signal that the future of Catholicism consists less of apocalypse and division and more of prophecy and unity. **A**

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Suspicious Minds

The spirituality of the postmodern nones

BY MICHAEL P. MURPHY

Much has been made about the “nones” and the current demographics of belief in the United States, especially those of young people. The term *nones* rose to prominence when a Pew Research Center poll in 2012 called “Nones on the Rise” discovered that nearly 20 percent of Americans claim no religious affiliation—a number that has been steadily climbing since 2007. Last January, National Public Radio aired a week-long series titled “Losing Our Religion: The Growth of the nones.” In the spring of 2013, a poll conducted by Michael Hout of the University of California, Berkeley, and Mark A. Chaves of Duke University similarly found that religious affiliation in the United States is at its lowest point since it began to be tracked.

Other researchers do not accept that number. But what was not denied in these studies was the hyperactive rate at which “none” was being declared by members of the millennial generation—the cohort born between the early 1980s and late 1990s. The initial Pew survey found that nearly 32 percent of this group claims no religious affiliation. No doubt many readers of *America* are familiar with this signature phenomenon of Generation Y (there have been several articles about it in these pages); but, while much has been said about the topic of nones and religion, very little has been written about what might have begotten such thinking and about the intellectual context in which the religious opinions of nones were formed.

On what philosophical and theological food have nones made their meal? What rituals inform their spirituality? And what is it about organized religion that has left them cold? One argument is that the nones are postmodern, and that

consideration of the slippery but increasingly intelligible and even prophetic characteristics of postmodernism will not only help us describe the rise of the nones but may also reveal how postmodern postures of belief exhibit patterns that resonate with many of the practices that constitute and characterize Christian spirituality. Moreover, because this phenomenon has occurred in various forms before in history, the specific habits of Catholic thought and spirituality are not only in position to integrate such developments, but they can also provide fruitful pastoral responses as well.

As good postmodernists, nones are suspicious of claims made regarding absolute truth—and even more reticent about making such claims themselves. This often frustrates those who prize conviction and certitude above all else. Still, in matters of faith, such a posture is ostensibly one of openness and receptivity, and nones are nothing if not open and receptive. In this sense, the spirituality of the nones resonates more with St. Augustine’s pointed question, “What does anyone say when he speaks about You?” than it does with Richard Dawkins’s pointed declaration, “The idea of a divine creator belittles the elegant reality of the universe.”

Claiming that there are phenomena about which words will always fail is itself a conviction and certitude and has many of the earmarks of a major theological tradition in the church, the apophaticism of mystical theology, where the focus is “negative”—on what cannot be said about God, as opposed to what can be said. This is not to say that the nones are resurrecting the figures of Blessed Juliana of Norwich or St. John of the Cross and channeling them for contemporary culture, but they are onto something when they cast suspicion on those who make vital truth claims reflexively, unreflectively and even proudly. The nones who are spiritually open seem to be declaring, as Flannery O’Connor declared in 1962, “How incomprehensible God must necessarily be to be the God of

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heaven and earth. You can't fit the Almighty into your intellectual categories."

That said, many Catholics are worried that the church is dying and that these fickle nones—fed on the cuisine of postmodernism—are the harbingers of the disintegration. But the nones are saying no to much more than institutional religion; they are saying no to other institutional pillars of late modern American culture as well—perhaps because so many institutions are saying “no” to them. Kevin Sullivan, a Gen-Y Catholic, wrote in a recent article in *The Washington Post*, “The American political system is marred by incivility and dishonesty. The idols of our pop culture are arrested, embarrass themselves publicly and live lavishly.” Mr. Sullivan’s complaint could well include the moral failures involved in the savings and loan crisis of recent history, the corpse-cold versions of corporate culture and the disequilibrium of health care; and so we admit these to his critique by implication.

But Mr. Sullivan’s main message to his fellow Catholic millennials is the lament that their shared quest to find a vibrant faith life in their own church is becoming a fool’s errand. A church that lacks “the courage and joy to live, in essence, ‘counter-culturally’” and whose “timid response to the child abuse scandal and political division among our own bishops and religious orders has left many Catholic millennials timid themselves” is a church that itself requires correction, renewal and spiritual reinvigoration. In this context, millennial nones—indeed all of us—can welcome Pope Francis’ reminder that the “church is a love story, not an institution.” Moreover, Pope Francis, who is clearly the first pope of the millennial age, claims an important solidarity with the theological ethos of nones, a development that promises to bear much fruit. Pope Francis recognizes that the nones and their no’s, in ways consonant with a long tradition of sound spirituality, by and large affirm the Christian yes. But how can this be? We must turn to history for a brief account.

An Intellectual Genealogy

Speaking in terms of intellectual context, the nones are on a peculiar cusp. On the one hand, they are ardent practitioners of Enlightenment certainty; on the other, they are banner-wa-

vers for the postmodern hermeneutics of suspicion. This ambivalence can come as no surprise. The Enlightenment provided a utopian panacea of sorts—the chance for perfectibility, the assertion of unlimited human improvement grounded in the discoveries gleaned by rational thought unfettered by neither the hard freight of history nor a remnant (and, as is oft-asserted, juvenile) belief in the airborne vagaries of theism. But it also revealed the limits of such cheap optimism, not to mention the boundaries and quandaries of human power.

The penchant among Westerners to view history in purely linear terms, as a cause and effect cascade of intellectual and technical progress, survived for a significant time; but this complacency was seriously called into question by the events of the first half of the 20th century, when it became clear that the fullest expression of rational thought was as often as not the manifestation of dark projects in injustice, violence and genocide. By 1945 traditional modes of reading history, already changing at a break-neck pace, shifted decisively to what Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age*, calls “exclusive humanism.” By 1968 all was awash in a full-blown sea change, and humanistic disciplines were called to reorient their critical methodologies within fluctuating horizons and the rubrics of subjectivity and relativity. The implacable forces of human cultures—much more than the metaphysics of mere ideas—became embraced as critical shapers of history.

This is one thesis offered to describe, at least partially, the origins of postmodernism and the context in which the nones were raised. In a postmodern world, no longer did one large narrative of culture credibly describe, no longer did a single account of “salvation history” spiritually sustain, no longer did rational systems of thought—and the institutions they spawned—safeguard the values of liberty, justice and equality. No longer was it reasonable to propose or even desire such things, for to do so was naive, undiscerning and unimaginative. To do so was to violate and treat disrespectfully any notion of what was real, empirical and on the ground. How retrograde it is today to seek after the “big TOE” (Theory of Everything) for, if we are honest, what we see in the world are so many little, disconnected TOE’s that claim multiplicity, indeterminacy, radical uniqueness and other exaltations of

Unaffiliated, But Not Uniformly Secular

	U.S. general public	Unaffiliated	Affiliated
<i>How important is religion in your life?</i>	%	%	%
Very important	58	14	67
Somewhat	22	19	24
Not too/not at all	18	65	8
Don't know/refused	1	1	*
	100	100	100
<i>Believe in God or universal spirit?</i>			
Yes, absolutely certain	69	30	77
Yes, but less certain	23	38	20
No	7	27	2
Other/don't know	2	5	1
	100	100	100
<i>Frequency of prayer</i>			
Daily	58	21	66
Weekly/monthly	21	20	22
Seldom/never	19	58	11
Don't know	2	1	1
	100	100	100
<i>Think of self as...</i>			
Religious person	65	18	75
Spiritual but not religious	18	37	15
Neither spiritual nor religious	15	42	8
Don't know	2	2	1
	100	100	100

Source: Pew Research Center survey, June 28-July 9, 2012. Q50, Q53-54, Q52, Q97a-b. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

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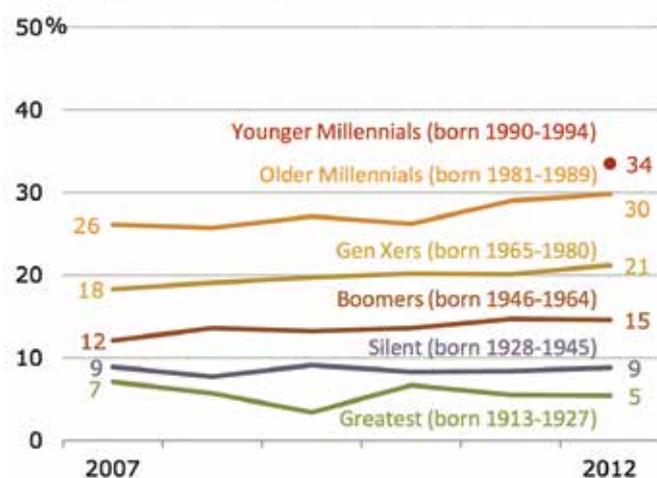
subjectivity. In the end, it is particularity, not the constructed universals of high fantasy, that describes the world more credibly. Raised in a context like this, is it any surprise that when asked to claim an absolute identity, they check the box, “None of the Above”?

An Affirmation of Negative Theology

The juggernaut of the nones reveals the completion of the Enlightenment, which displaces religion as a dominant force; but it also reveals the ways that one orthodoxy can be so easily replaced with another. Clearly, this can be disconcerting to

Recent Trends in Affiliation, by Generation

% of each age cohort that is unaffiliated



Source: Aggregated data from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2007-2012.

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both a culture that claims to value the coherence of the common good and a church that draws life from a fixed yet mysteriously dynamic mark. There is a bright side to all of this, however, especially when viewed against the very postmodern theology that provides the backdrop to these remarks. As introduced above, it is difficult to offer a uniform description of postmodernism (there are various camps—some sympathetic to theism, others hostile); but one area on which there is consensus is the weakness of words—that some things are “unsayable”—especially when they purport to describe absolute phenomena like God, orthodoxy and the geographies of spiritual encounters. Still, any serious thinker knows that a thing that cannot be spoken of is ultimately a thing worth speaking about.

An entire vein of postmodern thinking speaks creatively about this in ways not lost on the ironic imagination. From the classic texts by Jacques Derrida (“How to Avoid

Speaking”) and Emmanuel Levinas (his notion of “relation without relation,” his solidarity with the inscrutable other) to the primacy of passion-over-knowledge of John Caputo, to Richard Kearney’s notion of anatheism (God after God), postmodern approaches are suddenly not as novel or impenetrable as they first appeared. When Kearney observes how postmodern thought embraces “the appreciation of the mystical moment of nothingness that precedes the breakthrough to a mystical epiphany of renewal,” one hears the strong echo of the psalmist’s report from the frontier: “Be still and know that I am God.” In this way, postmodern thought can be read as a 21st-century version of an apophaticism that has long been part of the church. The humble reticence, in the face of divine majesty, to whisper *Adonai* (or nothing at all) instead of a proud *Yahweh*, the felt clarity of beholding the “cloud of unknowing,” the resolve to cultivate both the will and intellectual nimbleness required to abide in mystery—these are the proper rejoinders to the incomprehensible mystery of God.

Arguably, this is an optimistic reading of the nones; but it also discloses the ways that nones of a certain disposition, while they may be questioning toward organized religion, are neither swayed by other “religions” of contemporary culture—materialism, scientism or the utopian Shangri-La promised by the high priests of consumerism. More important, postmodern nones reject the idea that Enlightenment rationalism can account, in the final analysis, for transcendent or at least transcending values like personal dignity, heroism and human rights. In this sense, the penchant of postmodern nones to retreat into sanctuaries of indeterminacy and ambiguity can be viewed more as an act of intellectual receptiveness than indecision. In the face of the many linguistic difficulties that attend “God talk,” we would be well advised to mind our tongues and pray for humility when we sit at the foot of such resplendent phenomena.

An Ecclesial Existence 2.0

But there is work left to be done by the nones. Just as apophatic spirituality is ultimately a one-winged spirituality, so too, perhaps, is the reticent fence-sitting of the nones. Among others, C. S. Lewis observed that the apophatic is necessary because it cleanses us of our erroneous ideas about God so as to make a space for the revelation of “positive” (*kataphatic*) theology, the explosion of God’s incarnational presence upon the scene. There is a point in every life where one must respond to God’s perceived absence and reckon with the “traces” left behind, where one must make the Kierkegaardian leap or not. Put another way, as Daniel Lanois, an artist who dwells well in postmodern spaces observes, “He ain’t coming in ‘til you lay the table.”

As Pelagian as this sounds, it suits the nones well, for they must confront their subjectivity—and the criticism that

they are narcissists of the highest order living in the meta-static version of the “Me” generation. Fed on the porridge of “Sheilaism” of the 1980s, described by the sociologist Robert Bellah and others (the term has been used ever since to characterize the sui generis American approach to religion and spirituality), millennial nones would do well to heed the admonishment of their peer, Kevin Sullivan, when he says: “Do not throw your hands up in the air and wait for the community we seek to form. Instead, try returning to the pews, this time with a friend. If we are truly to find our identity as a generation, we cannot keep living in a paradox of being accepting of others’ convictions and beliefs but denying ourselves our own.”

The church, then, becomes a real option for the nones, as it has for others in the past. The Catholic revival of the 20th century was largely an intellectual revival. It came on the heels of the 19th-century age of ideology and was populated and propelled by first class intellectuals: Jacques Maritain, Edith Stein, Christopher Dawson, among so many others. The renewal of the nones will be something else—something more culturally particular, something, perhaps, less universal. Faithful to postmodernist premises, this revival may be “unsayable”: more about actions and less about words. “You have been told, O mortal, what is good,/and what the LORD requires of you:/Only to do justice and to love goodness,/and to walk humbly with your God” says the prophet Micah, an

exhortation that appeals to the ethos of Generation Y. As important as apologetics are, the style of a 21st-century Catholic revival will be more about walking than talking, more about the performance of ethics and aesthetics than philosophical apologetics. A church that is clearly under a reformative spirit (as it is just now) is a church that can embrace nones and a church that nones can embrace. The sacramentality of Catholic practices provides a venue for such spiritualities, where nones, who truly love good liturgy, might include in their liturgical milieu both Burning Man and the God-man who burns with love.

So worry not. The nones are on the quest. If they quest far enough, they will bump into a faith tradition that places a heavy emphasis on the pilgrim and that understands the unique event of being an embodied human. The church nourishes itself on the very idea of event, on the very reality of dwelling in a mystical body and encountering the body in which absence becomes true presence. Such pilgrims may be transformed, then, by a reconstructed appreciation for particularity in the universal, for the uniqueness of Jesus. Such pilgrims become then a *lumen fidei*; and in the light of such faith, as Pope Francis wrote in his first encyclical, “our hearts are touched and we open ourselves to the interior presence of the beloved, who enables us to recognize his mystery;” the mystery of our lives in Jesus who is both source and summit of the journey. ▲

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Lost and Found

Encountering forgiveness in surprising places

BY CAROL LACHAPPELLE

Some years before my father died, he and my stepmother moved into a retirement community, one of the nicer chains bordering Chicago. To help them downsize from their condo of 24 years, I spent an afternoon with my father in his “office,” going through the contents of a desk as teetering as the old man himself. Now 91 and legally blind for the past five years, he had been using it as a table—its chipped and rectangular surface now covered with bills and insurance claims, a stash of small rusty penknives and bundled ballpoint pens he had copped from local banks.

From five of the six drawers, we retrieved old receipts, blank envelopes and bank statements. From the sixth, the double-deep drawer on the right, I pulled out a disordered pile of my father’s personal papers: family letters, including one from a long-dead cousin; correspondence about his 60th high school reunion; office memos he’d written decades earlier while a salesman at a printing ink firm. That was the job that had brought him and my mother to Chicago from Philadelphia in 1939, a move that would forever darken their marriage and our family’s life.

Tucked back in the corner of the drawer was a small photo wallet, bright pink and bound with a thin gold-plated clasp.

“What’s this?” I asked my father, holding it close to his clouded eyes.

“What is it?” he said, reaching out a

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bony hand to touch it.

“It’s a wallet,” I answered, opening it. “It looks like it was Mom’s.”

“Oh,” my father said flatly, perhaps, like me, unable to comprehend what it was doing there, my mother long dead and buried these past 40 years.

“Can I have it?” I asked, barely hiding my excitement.

“Sure. What else is in the drawer?”

In Her Image

My mother loved hanging out in bars. When I was young, she belonged to two bowling leagues, both sponsored by bars, working-class suburban joints near where we lived. And while she was more upper-middle class, my mother nestled easily among those with whom she bowled and drank: truck drivers, plumbers, nurse’s aides—more my father’s people, the kind he was trying to escape.

Later on the day I found my mother’s wallet, I sat in Punky’s, a corner bar near the train that would take me back to the city. It was near 5 p.m. on a weekday, and the place was just beginning to fill up with the regulars, who came to play pool and listen to country music from the jukebox. I sat on a stool near the window, the buzz of the indoor neon sign louder than Dolly

Parton’s vow of eternal love, and carefully opened the wallet.

Of the 30 plastic sleeves, only six were filled, all at one end. In the first was a two-year pocket calendar, 1962 on one side, 1961 on the other. During those years I would graduate from high school, and my mother would be closer to dying from breast cancer.

Following were sleeves of old photos, including two of me from high school, and one of my mother’s father, Bill—or Poppity, as we called him. He is standing in front of a vine-covered cottage, somewhere near Philadelphia, looking straight into the camera,

a handsome white-haired man in his 60s, dressed in a white shirt and broad tie, a neutral expression on his face.

My mother was crazy about her father, though I recall little about him, or the rest of my relatives “back East.” My parents

had left home to make their life in the Midwest, a young couple in their mid-20s, with a toddler son and earnest hopes in tow. How they must have loved each other then, I think, trying to erase from my mind the rancor and drink-fueled mayhem of their later years, and how that must have given my mother the courage to leave behind



everyone else she loved.

Facing Poppity was a photo of him with my grandmother, the formidable and bosomy Mae, standing tall and straight next to him in dark sunglasses and flowered silk dress, her white purse pressed close to her side. They are on the boardwalk in Atlantic City, the iconic place of my childhood, where each summer my parents, my brother and I made the long drive from Chicago, stopping off in Philly to collect the relatives who would join us in our rented apartment at the shore. Maybe my mother's much beloved niece and her new husband would come along. Or my father's brother and his family, so similar to my own in the toll that drinking would take on their lives.

It was on those annual summer trips that we would be part of an extended family, if only for two short weeks. How exotic they all seemed to me—these blood relatives I hardly resembled, their very speech sounding foreign, my own flat Midwestern vowels a cause for laughter among them.

Then, crammed into the final sleeve of my mother's wallet, were two cloth medallions: a black and white Virgin Mary and the blood red Sacred Heart of Jesus. They sit among the familiar rest, jarring and incongruous.

A Generous Spirit

I was the product of a "mixed" marriage in the 1950s, forbidden by my father's Catholic teachings to know anything of my mother's Lutheran faith, though of course I would try. One bright Sunday morning—I was not yet 10—as my mother dressed for church, I asked to go with her, to see this secret place where my brother and I were not allowed, as if the air itself would corrode our very souls.

With little emotion, she told me no, a slight bitterness in her voice, as if I were to blame for the devil's pact she'd made when marrying my father, agreeing among other things not to interfere

in the "moral upbringing" of her own children. As if a mother could even do that. As if it could be done by barring the children from the place where their mother sought spiritual comfort.

I sometimes blame my own bitterness on having watched our small family unravel—and at such an early age—from the wedge that religion drove between my parents, and from the drink that followed or preceded or accompanied that wedge.

But in the end, none of it mattered. When my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 45, my parents drew together. And for years after her death, my father would say—even when remarried, my Italian Catholic stepmother just out of earshot—"I fell in love with a dying woman!"

And each time he'd say that, I'd see him again at my mother's hospital bedside, leaning forward in his chair, her small hand tight in his. It was as if the long contentious years of their marriage had melted away and they were back there again in Philadelphia, where, young and beautiful, they believed they could cross the country together, cross even the great divides of religion and class, newly wed and buoyed by nothing

more than the generosity of their love.

And it was in that same spirit of generosity—relit by the cauldron of cancer—that my mother freely gave my father the gift he had been praying for all their married life, one that she had just as earnestly resisted: She became a convert to his faith. And when together they knelt at the altar in the small hospital chapel where she took her First Communion, there wasn't, truly, a dry eye in the house.

The clack of pool balls returns me to the smoky present of the now-jammed bar. I close my mother's wallet and make my way out to the train platform,

the sharp smell of booze and smoke mixing in my memory with those of incense and death.

My mother resented dying young for many reasons, among them that I'd be left without her to negotiate the uncertain passage into womanhood. She had learned a great deal in the last five years of her life—hard lessons about love, and especially about forgiveness, that I know she wanted to pass on.

Those holy medallions mashed into the cracked sleeve of her wallet made me think that perhaps—close to 40 years later—she had. **A**

ON THE WEB

Faith reflections from young Catholics.

americamagazine.org/generationfaith

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JOIN THE CONVERSATION



FILM | DAVID J. MICHAEL

A COMMERCIAL CHRIST

'Son of God' presents a beautiful, blockbuster Jesus.

When I was maybe 7 or 8 years old, I saw the movie "Jesus," also known as the Jesus film, at Moody Bible Church in Chicago. I remember Jesus' face, his kind voice and not much else (also that it was Martin Luther's birthday and that we sang a hymn of his before the movie).

Ten years ago I attended another Jesus film that would leave a much greater impression. I found myself with my mom, sister and uncle in a shabby strip-mall theater. My dad

had died rather suddenly that fall, and my mom's brother had been unable to make the funeral. Now he had flown in from Sweden to pay his respects, and one evening, my mom, a fundamentalist Protestant, said we were going to see "The Passion of the Christ." The head of the Southern Baptists' Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission had screened the film, by Mel Gibson, for "creeping, excessive Catholicism," and found none, which cleared the way for evangelicals to see it.

My uncle—a one-time missionary

turned agnostic truck driver—was unenthusiastic. But he was a guest and she a recent widow, so he shrugged and went. The movie, a two-hour blood bath, was tough sledding. Afterward, between sniffles, my mom and sister pronounced the film great. I asked my uncle what he thought. He cringed. "Heavy. Violent." This from a man whom I have seen disembowel a deer in the middle of a forest.

Though the two films could not be more different, both have enjoyed wide success. Despite its dubious cinematic quality, "Jesus," which is really an evangelization tool from Campus Crusade for Christ, has been viewed by approximately—get this—six billion people since 1979 and has led approximately 200 million people to make some sort of faith commitment. "The Passion of

WHERE'S MEL? Diogo Morgado as Jesus in "Son of God"



PHOTO: CASEY CRAFTORD © LIGHTWORKERS MEDIA INC. AND HEARST PRODUCTIONS, INC.

the Christ” earned over \$600 million, 20 times the amount it cost to make the film. This latter figure likely was lurking when the producers behind the History Channel’s hugely popular, 10-hour mini-series “The Bible,” Mark Burnett and Roma Downey, decided to recut part of the series footage and re-release it as **Son of God**.

The movie opens with an action-packed montage of Old Testament scenes narrated by a weirdly spry-looking John, sitting alone at Patmos. Then Jesus is born, and the movie fast forwards to him recruiting Peter with the unlikely phrase, “We’re going to change the world!” From there, the film is a greatest-hits reel of Jesus’ miracles, followed by the Passion. The pacing is rushed, and much is sacrificed, notably the wedding at Cana, and John the Baptist gets all of a four second flashback. But it *feels* long.

The cable-broadcast roots of “Son of God” were often apparent: low-grade computer-generated imagery and grainy film in dark scenes were distracting. The film is also rife with clichés, whose purpose is to identify the setting. Romans eating grapes on daybeds suggest sin and power. British accents tell us this movie is serious, foreign, ancient. I longed for the Latin and Aramaic of “The Passion,” not to mention its rougher realism.

Most of the main characters in “Son of God” are too easy on the eyes. Jesus, played by the Portuguese actor Diogo Morgado, looks vaguely like Brad Pitt, with beautiful hair and teeth that my toothpaste tube describes as “optic white.” Similarly, I found Roma Downey (of “Touched by an Angel”) an uncomfortably attractive Mary.

Insofar as the film has merit, it is to be found in its strong focus on the Roman occupation of Israel, dramatizing the tension between Pilate and Caiaphas and highlighting Barabas’s role as an agitator—context which is often lost. The film is at times en-

tertaining, which is the goal of most Hollywood epics, so in that sense it is effective. But if entertainment is the goal, one could do far better.

Perhaps I am just being a snob. There were many wet eyes in the theater as Jesus was hanging from the cross. And when the credits rolled, just after Jesus appears to John on Patmos, the light streaming through the whole in his hand as he declares “There will be no death, ever!” the audience applauded.

After the film, a man in a suit encouraged us to pray about the opening and called our attention to opportunities to host screenings or purchase bulk tickets for churches or schools. “This isn’t about Mark and Roma making money. Believe me. They have plenty. This is about sharing the story of Jesus,” he said.

The costs of “Son of God” have probably been recouped several times over, thanks to the success of “The Bible,” which garnered 100 million viewers worldwide and, when released on DVD, quickly became the top-selling mini-series of all time. Given this fact, perhaps the film—the stated aim of which is to share the Gospel story with as many people as possible—could have been made available free on the Internet.

“Jesus,” by contrast, has been translated into over 1,000 languages by a nonprofit ministry and shown in every country of the world. It was recently announced that the film will be remastered and re-released in select theaters. For those who would champion movies as an evangelistic tool—and as “Jesus” shows, they can be quite effective—I would ask what it means for us to put our evangelistic efforts in the hands of commercial companies, whose goals are not our goals. The message of the Gospel, after all, is not always in tune with the desires of the market. One of

the only pre-Passion moments in “Son of God” where Jesus drops his million-dollar smile is when he drives out the money-changers from the Temple.

The “Son of God” will probably enjoy box-office success. But does that justify portraying the Son of God as a blockbuster movie hero? If commercial film is largely an entertainment medium, what does it mean to encounter Jesus in that medium while shoveling popcorn into your mouth? To watch the crucifixion with a Hans Zimmer sound track, as though you were watching “Man of Steel”? What is lost and what, if anything, is gained? As the poet W. H. Auden noted, “Christianity draws a distinction between what is frivolous and what is serious, but allows the former its place. What it condemns is not frivolity but idolatry, that is to say, taking the frivolous seriously.”

The day after I saw “Son of God,” I wrote my mom to ask if the “The Passion” had had any long-term spiritual effects or if it was just a temporary, emotional experience for her. “To be honest, I think it was more of a momentary thing. But you can’t judge! Some people might come to the Lord through these films.” Perhaps they will. When I saw “The Passion of the Christ,” I was on my way out of the evangelical church and, I thought, out of the Christian faith. What I wanted, and what the film could not deliver, was a portrayal of the greater suffering: Christ’s momentary separation from the Father, a separation that I felt from both my father and God. Nor could the gruesome depiction of physical suffering of the crucifixion communicate Christ’s physicality, his humanity, his presence with us. For that, I needed the Eucharist.

ON THE WEB

Bill McGarvey and Tim Reidy discuss the Oscar nominees. americamagazine.org/podcast

DAVID J. MICHAEL is a writer and producer in Brooklyn, N.Y.

QUEER AS FOLK

When Pete Seeger died on Jan. 27 at the age of 94, there were some minor skirmishes about his political affiliations, but there was little dispute about his character. Here was a faithful husband, a good father and grandfather, a loyal neighbor who could care less about the trappings of fame. He and his wife, Toshi, were married for almost 70 years, and he lived in a modest home in Beacon, N.Y., for nearly as long.

A different kind of folk singer emerged this fall with the release of “Inside Llewyn Davis,” a film by Joel and Ethan Coen. Supposedly based on the Greenwich Village picker Dave Van Ronk, Llewyn Davis is a struggling musician trying to make a living playing in coffee shops in New York City in the early 1960s. He has recently released his first solo album, though it is not selling well. His fans seem to prefer his earlier work, made with a onetime partner, but that relationship is over for reasons that eventually become clear.

Davis is a talented singer. He is not, however, a good human being. He sleeps with his friend’s wife and pays for her abortion when she becomes pregnant. Another former girlfriend is raising his child alone. He treats most of the people he meets with hostility, including his most devoted fans. He seems to care only about a marmalade cat. Llewyn Davis is no Pete Seeger. The only thing that redeems him in the eyes of the audience is his music. When he sings, his clear tenor voice momentarily wipes away memories of his boorish behavior.

Seeger does not appear in “Inside

Llewyn Davis,” but another, unnamed folk musician does. At the end of a set at the Gaslight Café, Llewyn is summoned outside to meet a mysterious stranger while a gravelly voiced singer takes the stage. The film does not say who the singer is, but you don’t have to be from Hibbing, Minn., to figure it out. The shadow of Bob Dylan looms over “Inside Llewyn Davis” from the very beginning. And not only because he is the most famous singer to emerge from the Greenwich Village folk scene. Anyone who has read about Dylan’s early career knows that he shares a common trait with the film’s eponymous hero. Both of them could be, well, jerks.

In *Positively Fourth Street*, David Hajdu writes about Dylan’s place in the emerging folk milieu and his relationship with the singer Joan Baez. Baez was better known than Dylan in those early days, and she graciously helped launch his career. He returned the favor by dumping her and refusing to play in public with her when he lost his interest in folk music. This was a long time ago, of course, and no artist should necessarily be condemned for sins committed at such an early age. (Dylan has since apologized.) Yet even the most sympathetic fan would concede Dylan is still a prickly character.

I suspect that the Coen brothers had Dylan’s history in mind when writing “Llewyn Davis.” One of the film’s themes, as A. O. Scott of *The New York Times* pointed out, is how

messy human behavior is and yet how sublime our art can be. The Coen brothers clearly enjoy playing against the audience’s expectations. The early folk scene was known for its generous and cooperative spirit. People like Pete Seeger did not care so much who got credit for writing a song, as long as people were singing it.

A Showtime documentary celebrating the music of “Llewyn Davis” captures this good feeling. In the documentary, Marcus Mumford, in remarks between the performances by contemporary musicians, declares with some relief that there were no egos in the room as they were filming. How nice.

And how unusual. “Inside Llewyn Davis” is a blunt reminder that beautiful music does not necessarily come from beautiful people. Even the angelic-voiced Jean Berkey, played by

Carey Mulligan, has a wicked tongue. I did not care for Llewyn Davis the person, but I can’t get enough of the “Inside Llewyn Davis” soundtrack. Davis is an imperfect messenger, but then again, who isn’t? It’s the music, the words, that matter.

It should not matter that our favorite singer or writer is a loathsome individual. An artist’s work should be enough if it can nourish us, make us more sensitive and wise. Artists who manage to flourish in both their life and their art are rare indeed. When they come along, it’s important we take notice.

Rest in peace, Pete.

Llewyn Davis is an imperfect messenger, but then again, who isn’t?



EPISTOLARY TREASURES

The vanishing art of letter-writing

THE SELECTED LETTERS OF WILLA CATHER

By Willa Cather
 Edited by Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout
 Knopf. 752p \$37.50

THE LETTERS OF T. S. ELIOT Volume 4: 1928-1929

By T. S. Eliot
 Edited by Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden
 Yale University Press. 864p \$50

THE LETTERS OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY 1923-1925

By Ernest Hemingway
 Edited by Sandra Spanier, Albert J. DeFazio III and Robert W. Trogdon
 Cambridge University Press. 604p \$40

THE CORRESPONDENCE OF HENRY D. THOREAU Volume 1: 1834-1848 (The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau)

By Henry D. Thoreau
 Edited by Robert N. Hudspeth
 Princeton University Press. 544p \$99.50

SUITABLE ACCOMMODATIONS An Autobiographical Story of Family Life: The Letters of J. F. Powers, 1942-1963

By J. F. Powers
 Edited by Katherine A. Powers
 Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 480p \$35

There have been many famous letters and letter-writers in history. One thinks immediately of Cicero, who made it an art form. Then, of course, we have St. Paul, who filled his letters to early Christian communities with advice and doctrine, news from the front and occasional scoldings. One also thinks of Henry VIII writing to Anne Boleyn,

when Henry looked good to her. Or John Keats writing Fanny Brawne from his deathbed. Or the famous letter written by the Italian hermit Peter Morrone to the dean of the College of Cardinals in 1294, which led to Peter's election as Pope Celestine V.

People once maintained relationships that were primarily epistolary. Loves were lost and found with the arrival of letters. A man might run to the daily post, anxious to discover if his marriage proposal was accepted, a woman, to see if one had been offered.

Letters were harbingers of joy but also dread and surprise. Millions of mothers and fathers learned of the death of their sons at war from an arriving letter. Just two generations ago, letters were the primary means of confession, from one friend to another, and the preferred way of sending and receiving serious news, better than the telephone.

This all began to change in 1995, as e-mail replaced letters at a rapid clip. As a result, our primary means of communication with one another has been easily disposed of and replaced by one that is mostly absent of format, tone and geographical relevance.

This is why we might want to pause and consider a batch of excellent books published in the last year. These volumes often require decades to collect, collate, research and produce—and we

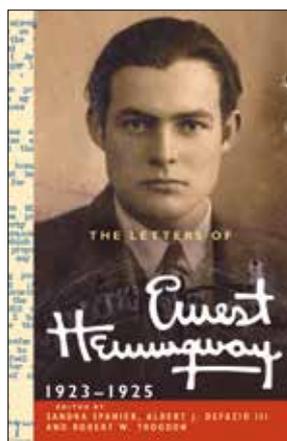
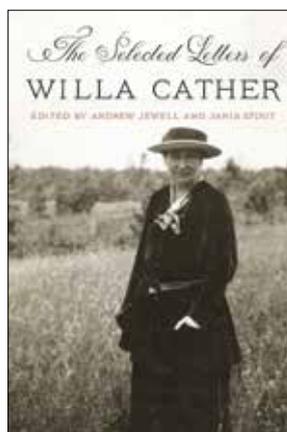
have a flurry of them offering epistolary treasures. There will come a time in the future when we will have no more of these. Rest uneasy; your favorite contemporary novelist or theologian is not writing or receiving collectible correspondence right now.

...

Letter-writing became more affordable on March 3, 1845, with the U.S. Postal Act. Congress essentially broke up the monopoly of the Postal Service by regulating prices, making the mail accessible for the average Joe. It is no accident that we do not often think of writers or public figures of modest means in previous centuries as letter-writers. Letter-writing had not come into its own in the days of Jonathan Edwards and Phyllis Wheatley. Counting from the Postal Act until the late 20th century, one might calculate the golden era of epistolary communication at just under 150 years.

We've just seen the publication of the first volume in what will eventually be three to include every extant piece of correspondence associated with Henry David Thoreau, whose editors explain in their historical introduction how much the author of *Walden* benefitted from the Postal Act. There was a direct correspondence

between it and Thoreau's blossoming into one of the most interesting letter-writers of his century. Those same editors have chosen to publish not only Thoreau's extant letters but those written to him. The result is a thorough reconstruction of his biography,



which should appeal to anyone with an abiding interest in the most important 19th-century American writer of non-fiction.

The important role of an editor in selecting, compiling and annotating a writer's letters comes through clearly in all of these volumes, most of all, perhaps, in this new book on Thoreau. The letters that he wrote to his sister show a warmth and humanity that would be unfamiliar to the thousands of late 19th-century readers who only read a collection of his letters collected and published by Ralph Waldo Emerson soon after Thoreau's death. Emerson's volume included only the more stoical Thoreau, because that's the man Emerson wanted people to remember.

Also interesting is how reading a writer's letters can lead to a rapid re-evaluation of the writer. I now appreciate Willa Cather much more than I did before. A brilliant woman, she was clearly one of the most interesting figures of her age, whether she was writing about Nebraska, New York City or Quebec.

The most intimate remarks are written in letters from one friend to another. This is why many writers have restricted access to, or destroyed, their correspondence. Willa Cather is one example. The public hadn't seen more than a handful of her letters since she died in 1947, which explains why the chunky volume of what has just been published

has received so much attention. Other writers, including Somerset Maugham, destroyed all their correspondence,

leaving nothing to chance. Bess Truman famously burned about 1,300 letters that she had written to her husband, Harry, just after the former president's death. Alternatively, it is common for access to be restricted for a quarter century or so after the death of the writer, so that most of the people mentioned in the correspondence will also have died.

We, of course, love to look in on the intimacies in letters, hence writers' desire to restrict us sometimes. Toward the end of her productive life, Cather remarked to her brother on Nov. 6, 1938: "As for me, I have cared too much, about people and places—cared too hard. It made me, as a writer. But it will break me in the end." In fact, we witness a new Cather in these letters, a picture that enlightens the novels, making me want to read them again. There have

long been debates about her sexuality, and she still says nothing about it in her correspondence, but I found a fascinating remark to one of her friends from college: "Life is too short for love anyway, one is a fool to be an exile."

Catholic themes are illuminated in Cather's letters, too. Her middle American readers were often concerned about what they perceived as the novelist's Catholic leanings in the later novels, and this collection shows Cather responding to those queries. "You asked me...

whether I were on the road to becoming a Catholic. By no means! I do, however, admire the work of the Catholic missionary priests on this continent," she wrote to the president of Czechoslovakia.

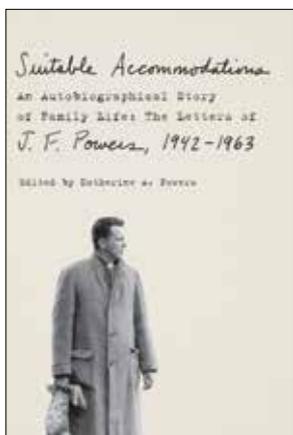
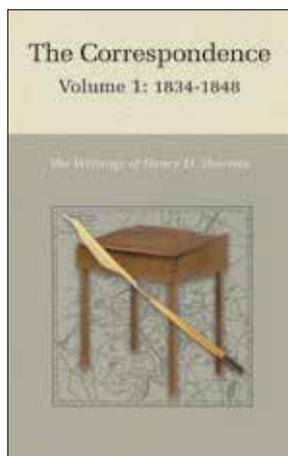
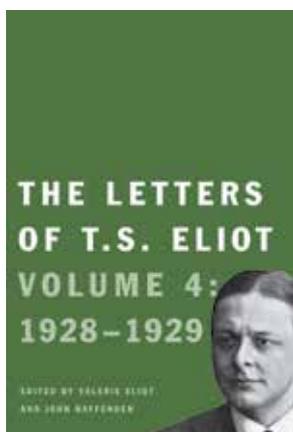
The fifth of six planned volumes of Robert Penn Warren's letters was published in late 2011. The final volume appeared last December. A three-time Pulitzer Prize-winner, Warren is largely forgotten today. He deserves better, although only one of his novels, and just a handful of poems, are included in the current canon. My only complaint with the volume under review is about the repetition. Warren wrote a lot of letters, often repeating verbatim judgments and observations

from one correspondent to another, and when these repetitions are not edited out, they have a cluttering effect.

Fortunately, none of the books under review suffer from the self-consciousness of writers who pen letters to one another with a view to future publication. This is not always so. A reviewer, for instance, in

The Times Literary Supplement recently took a volume of letters between Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin to task for this (10/18/13). The reviewer observed, "The personae these supposedly private letters create are as shrewdly crafted as anything in their authors' poems or novels." This tendency has been around since Pliny the Younger was writing his letters, as if for future publication, in Rome in the first century.

No one was further away from letter-writing for publication than Ernest Hemingway, whose second volume of correspondence, covering the Paris expatriate years, 1923 to 1925, forms the most purely enjoyable book of those considered here. Hemingway wrote



on every imaginable form of paper, almost always quickly, communicating as brashly as he lived his life. "EXCUSE THE UPPER CASE TYPE BUT THE DAMN MILL STICKS OTHERWISE AND I WANT TO WRITE THIS FAST," he sent to a friend in April 1925. But he also very often comes across as the bigoted jack-ass that we know him to have been.

Reading the letters of our favorite writers can be a quick way to dash our appreciation of them as people. In that vein, the Catholic novelist J. F. Powers comes across here as a worrying, often bitter, self-involved annoyance to many of his friends and colleagues, while T. S. Eliot almost shines through his letters to correspondents around the globe with wisdom gained early and intelligence.

BOOKS | JOHN P. MCCARTHY

THE BEST SPIN WINS

THIS TOWN **Two Parties and a Funeral—Plus** **Plenty of Valet Parking!—in** **America's Gilded Capital**

By Mark Leibovich
Blue Rider Press. 386p \$27.95

The dysfunction that plagues Washington, D.C., is usually attributed to ideological division and the attendant unwillingness to compromise. A contrary explanation is discernible in Mark Leibovich's chatty book *This Town*. According to Leibovich, "the city, far from being hopelessly divided, is in fact hopelessly interconnected." There's an unofficial cabal—"The Club"—whose members are motivated by self-enrichment and self-perpetuation. Opportunism, not partisanship, drives these pols, journalists, lobbyists, staffers, fixers, pundits and socialites. They're a cozy lot. Regardless of party or professional affiliation, they attend the same galas, read the same e-mail blasts and covet the same

There is one volume that gives me a bit of hope for the genre. Perhaps there is a future for looking in on what writers have to say to each other and to their friends with the approach taken by the editors of *The Selected Letters of Robert Creeley*, the modernist poet, soon to come from The University of California Press. I have not seen it yet, but I'm told that they are including faxes and e-mails in addition to traditional letters on paper. But my suspicion is that this is approach will not be widely repeated. We simply do not communicate in short form e-mail the way we once did, pen to paper.

JON M. SWEENEY is the author of many books, including *The Pope Who Quit: A True Medieval Tale of Mystery, Death, and Salvation* (Image Books).

whopping book advances and monthly retainers. Political beliefs are merely tools for attaining and maintaining power and lucre. The underlying problem is not the refusal to cross party lines, it is the striving to forage in the right buffet lines.

Against the idea it was ever thus, Leibovich argues that this clique has changed dramatically in recent years. Its numbers have ballooned thanks to the explosion of lobbying firms, special interests, cable TV, social media and upstart news outlets like Politico. Instead of fostering greater transparency and diluting power inside the Beltway, this growth has altered the habits and preoccupations of the elite. In short, they are grotesquely status-conscious and

hilariously prone to focusing on the trivial.

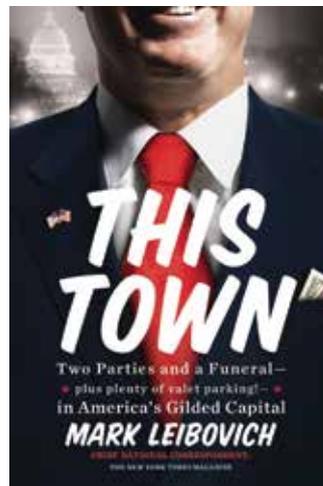
Leibovich, chief national correspondent for *The New York Times Magazine* and a former *Washington Post* reporter, admits to being ensconced in the old-media wing of *The Club*. He is acutely aware that *This Town* exemplifies several of the phenomena it describes. The book is a piece of meta-journalism, by which he hopes to raise his own profile and profit financially. He meticulously reveals his connections to the individuals and institutions under scrutiny. Along with demonstrating how incestuous Washington is, these disclaimers are disarming—but only up to a point. They don't guarantee he's telling the whole story.

In conversational prose, Leibovich strings together profiles, anecdotes and accounts of various capital rituals, beginning with the funeral in June 2008 of Tim Russert, moderator of "Meet the Press," and ending with a reception at the Georgetown home of the power couple Sally Quinn and Ben Bradlee in

December 2012. He has an air of gently mocking bemusement and never tries to hide his affection and/or scorn for his subjects.

His descriptive talents and dry sense of humor impress. He's a master of the witheringly sarcastic summary quip—frequently deployed in tandem with his nose for hypocrisy. Three prominent ex-congressmen

are chided for how they have "moneitized their government service." And one married couple, top Democratic lobbyists, are skewered for fetishizing the gourmet comestibles served at their functions, including one hosted in support of food stamps. Leibovich repeatedly goes after the Obama cam-



paign's rigid anti-lobbyist plank, which creaked when it came time to staff the executive branch, then buckled completely when numerous first-term aides left for lucrative jobs on K Street.

A chapter entitled "How It Works" chronicles the scandal that erupted on Capitol Hill after Kurt Bardella, a brash young press aide to Rep. Darrell Issa, was caught sharing work e-mails with Leibovich while he was researching *This Town*. The dizzying episode reveals just how parasitical things are at the nexus of media and politics. Elsewhere Leibovich suggests that the snarky, polarized discourse dominating media coverage of Washington is often fake—faux conflict staged to boost ratings and sell books. Meanwhile, inside the well-appointed green rooms, mansions, ballrooms and eateries where the rhetorical combatants routinely cross paths, sucking-up is the default mode of communication.

The biggest dig against Leibovich's entertaining portrait is that he doesn't actually reveal how Washington functions because he doesn't show the causal connections between the behavior he recounts and specific laws, regulations, policies and programs. Without detailed examples of the impact on the workings of the federal government, *This Town* runs the risk of being dismissed as so much gossip, innuendo and ad hominem besmirching. Leibovich might contend the links are obvious but difficult to prove. Members of The Club tend not to leave smoking canapés behind. Nevertheless, he ought to provide more hard evidence. To which he could reply, "I never claimed to be Bob Woodward, Dean of Investigative Journalists."

It's more likely Leibovich would embrace the criticism. Washington's substance deficit is the point. It's a shallow, frivolous place where perception and appearance rule. Fixating on trappings at the expense of nuts-and-bolts is appropriate, since that's what the movers-and-shakers do. In later

chapters, Leibovich is more explicit about depicting D.C. as a virtual reality inside which issues are irrelevant. For example, "Much of Washington ceased to be about true narratives long ago." In other words, the best spin wins.

But this familiar tack undercuts itself. If so many Washington narratives are suspect, why should we trust Leibovich's? If the effects on real-world outcomes are so oblique, why should anyone outside the Beltway take notice? If there is no concrete proof that the country is worse off because of the dissembling insularity of D.C. elites, then maybe it isn't. Indeed, some argue that our system, with its built-in tensions and checks and balances, was designed to encourage stalemate. It's supposed to be hard to get things done.

Even so, the degree to which Leibovich brackets principles and integrity renders *This Town* oddly apo-

litical. Not surprisingly, money is the root villain in this cynical smorgasbord. It doesn't pay to have genuine political convictions in Washington; you and your ideals won't last long. As for the apparent dysfunction and paralysis, gridlock feathers more nests than change. And no matter what, platters of cash await those adept at packaging marketable messages. One way or another, therefore, Leibovich will profit from telling us the waters of the Potomac run green. At least he does so with pithy flair and ample self-awareness. Still, I wish he'd taken Deep Throat's advice to Woodward and Bernstein and followed the money farther downstream—past the Kennedy Center and nearer to the lives of ordinary Americans.

JOHN P. MCCARTHY is a freelance writer in Westchester County, N.Y.

MICHAEL V. TUETH

SISTERS ON SCREEN

VEILED DESIRES Intimate Portrayals of Nuns in Postwar Anglo-American Film

By Maureen A. Sabine
Fordham University Press. 338p \$30

Dozens of well-known American and British actresses have portrayed religious women in film. Some of them—Jennifer Jones in "The Song of Bernadette" and Susan Sarandon in "Dead Man Walking"—won Academy Awards for their performances. There have been nuns who broke into song—Debbie Reynolds in "The Singing Nun," and Julie Andrews in "The Sound of Music." Many other Oscar-winning actresses—Loretta Young and Celeste Holm in "Come to the Stable," Rosalind

Russell in "The Trouble with Angels," and Shirley MacLaine in "A Mule for Sister Sara"—have starred in light comedies, and an odd couple of other Oscar-winners—Whoopi Goldberg and Maggie Smith—shared convent life in "Sister Act."

With a book whose title might be an allusion to the biblical Salome, *Veiled Desires*, Maureen Sabine focuses on "the cinematic nun as a woman and a religious in the twentieth century, one striving for a life that integrates personal and professed, worldly and sacred, traditional and modern, gender and spiritual aspirations." In doing so, she challenges Anders Nygren's authorita-



tive study of “Agape and Eros” which, drawing a strong contrast between the two types of love, “repeatedly underlines the superiority of self-giving agape and self-seeking eros.” Sabine aims at deconstructing this dichotomy as she discusses in considerable detail the contents and contexts of a dozen films, beginning with “The Bells of St. Mary’s” (1945) and ending with “Doubt” (2008). Each film focuses on a particular brand of “desire” in the lives of women religious: sexual desire and sublimation in “Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison,” the selfless desire to serve others in “The Bells of St. Mary’s,” the passionate and even pathological desires that arise in “Agnes of God,” and the desire for salvation in the face of sin and death in “Dead Man Walking,” among others. She lists about 20 other films that she refers to throughout the study as well.

It is not coincidental that these films starred some of the most popular and attractive Hollywood “ladies”: Ingrid Bergman, Deborah Kerr, Audrey Hepburn, Julie Andrews, Susan Sarandon, Meryl Streep and others whom Sabine often describes as “ethereal” or “luminous.” She suggests that the casting of this type of actress “may point to something more powerful: which is the redoubled energy of desire she radiates as a film star and a religious icon in a modern visual era where the cinema has replaced the cathedral.”

Along with the analysis of the films, Sabine sometimes describes the place of these roles in the careers of certain actresses. Having portrayed numerous noble and heroic women in “Casablanca,” “The Bells of St. Mary’s,” “For Whom The Bell Tolls,” and even a saint in “Joan of Arc,” Bergman fell precipitously off the pedestal when she became pregnant with the child of married director Roberto Rossellini in 1949. In response to this “betrayal” to her millions of fans, she was denounced in the Senate as a “powerful

influence for evil” and effectively black-listed from Hollywood. For the next several years, it was assumed that her career was over. (It was not.) Sabine also describes the life of the former film actress, Dolores Hart, who, known as the actress who gave Elvis Presley his first on-screen kiss, entered a Benedictine Abbey in 1963 and happily remains there today.

Sabine comments that, of course, most of these films about women religious were written and directed by men. She suggests that one of the reasons for the high quality of “Dead Man Walking” was the involvement of the actual subject of the film, Helen Prejean, C.S.J., who was regularly consulted and present on the set. Similarly, the director and screenwriter John Patrick Shanley’s first-grade teacher, Sister Peggy McEntee, on whom he modeled the character of the young Sister James, was also a technical advisor on his film version of “Doubt.”

She also notices the intertextuality of these films. “The Bells of St. Mary’s” shows up in two very different films. Frank Capra includes a scene from the film in “It’s a Wonderful Life,” making the clear comparison between the sacrificial agape of Ingrid Bergman’s Sister Benedict and Jimmy Stewart’s George Bailey. Many years later, in the true story of the abusive nuns running the Magdalene homes for Irish “bad girls” in “The Magdelenes,” the sadistic warden Sister Bridget identifies with Sister Benedict as offering up her own life as a sacrifice (ironically not only of herself but of thousands of hopeless young women).

Readers will have their favorite chapters, but in my opinion Sabine illustrates her theme most thoroughly in her study of “Dead Man Walking.” She documents the many ways in which the 1995 film depicts a contemporary nun who lives and works in a housing project, wears distinctively inexpensive clothes rather than a religious habit, and offers spiritual direction that was

formerly a ministry reserved mainly to priests and monks. In the course of the film, the bond between her and the death-row inmate whom she counsels “becomes emblematic of the love story between God and undeserving humanity, in which agape and eros meet.”

The study is perhaps too detailed and sometimes repetitious, but it beautifully exemplifies the benefits of interdisciplinary research in gender studies, church history, cinematic analysis, and American culture. Her 25-page bibliography testifies to her thoroughness and range, and her vast compilation of evidence convincingly illustrates that “in their dramatic contention with the life force of eros and the divine force of agape, cinematic nuns occupy a space where the veil momentarily parts between this world and something beyond it.”

MICHAEL V. TUETH, S.J., is an associate professor of communication and media studies at

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My Anxious Heart

EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A), MARCH 2, 2014

Readings: Is 49:14–15; Ps 62:2–9; 1 Cor 4:1–5; Mt 6:24–34

“Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?” (Mt 6:27)

My parents spoke German at home when they did not want the children to know what was being discussed, which was often the children themselves. It is a method parents use, with varying success, depending upon how well they have passed on the mother tongue. I was not very old when I heard my parents describe me as *nervös* and *ängstlich*. I understood enough German to know that I was being described as “high-strung” and “anxious.” I can report that their description of me was accurate and has not necessarily become less accurate with the passing of time.

When Jesus instructs us, therefore, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear,” it is something that I struggle to hear. And when Jesus tells us to “look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” and to “consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these,” I worry about how I am supposed to put these spiritual insights into action and live my life according to them.

These passages challenge me to let worry go and depend upon God’s care for me, yet there remains a nagging concern that Jesus seems to be speaking against prudence, foresight and planning on the grounds that it is com-

pletely futile. Is it really better to live a hand-to-mouth, day-to-day existence than store away money in a 401(k) retirement plan? Exactly and in what sense do wild birds and lilies show us how to live?

Obviously, birds and lilies do not teach us literally how to live human lives. The birds and flowers are not models to imitate, but they are an example to us. If God pours care on wild birds and flowers, how much more does God care for us! It is what we call an a fortiori argument: If God cares so much for birds and flowers, how much more does God care for you, a human being, created in the image of God?

It is this faith in God’s care that allows us to live free, or at least struggle to live free of anxiety, for we know that God’s love for us transcends any of the expected or unexpected difficulties that life might throw at us. Isaiah speaks of God as a mother who cannot “forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb” (49:15). Maternal love is often the most powerful love—unconditional, lavish and limitless—that one has ever experienced. But, the prophet says, even if you can imagine mothers forgetting their children, God says, “yet I will not forget you.” God is presented here as the mother who always and without fail cares for our welfare.

Because of this love, with which God sustains and comforts us, we are

encouraged to cut our entanglements with and dependence upon material possessions, for reliance on material goods leads us to seek security in them and not in God, as Pope Francis has been pointing out since the beginning of his pontificate as a challenge to the church. Possessions can be lost, destroyed and stolen.

They do not last forever. As Jesus says, “You cannot serve God and wealth.” We need to decide who or what is our master.

That does not mean,



PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

Listen to Jesus’ words on worry and anxiety. What worry or anxiety do you need to let go of and trust in God’s care for you?

ART: TADA DUNNE

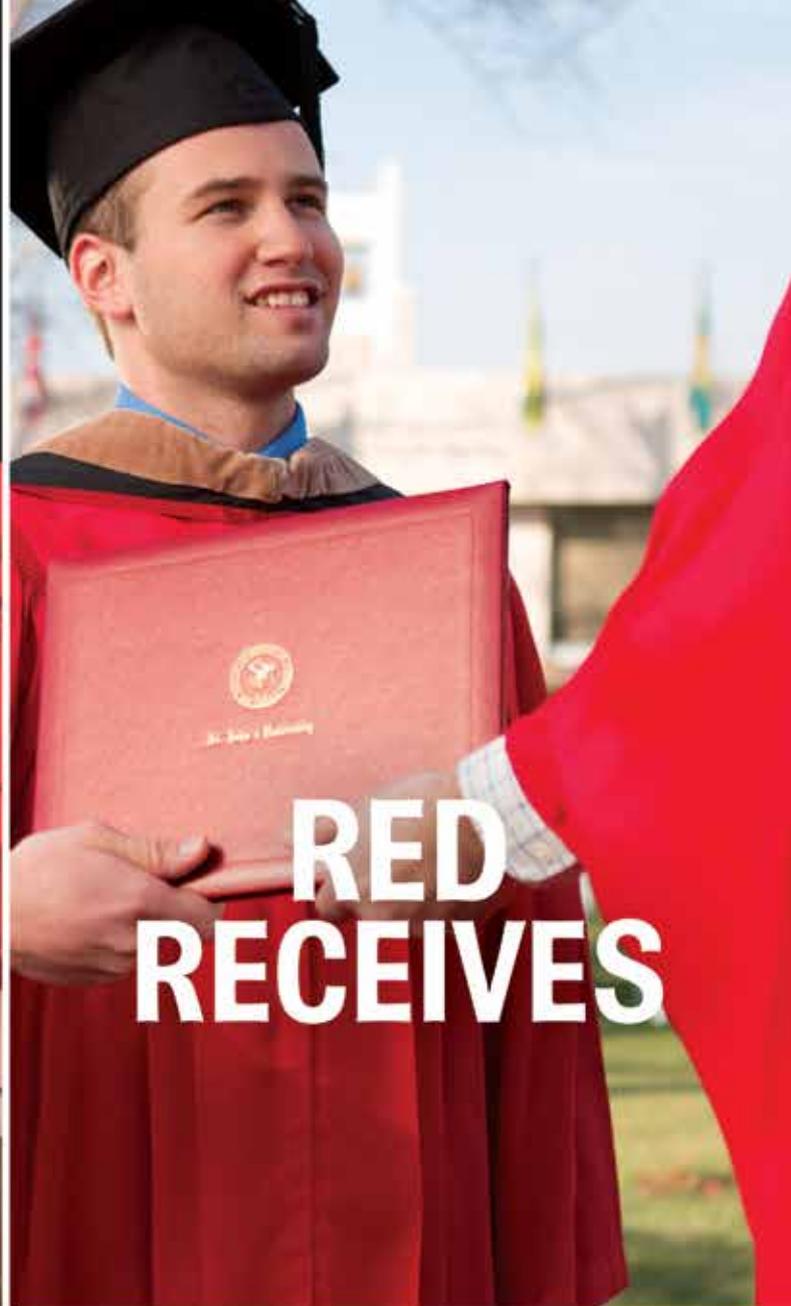
however, that we should not act prudently and not plan for the future or that we do not need the things that sustain our earthly life. Jesus’ teachings are not about being indifferent to the practicalities of life, but about trusting God above all things. Jesus says we should “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” For those of us who struggle most with anxiety, we can start with the promise that we need “not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” We can start trusting in God today and dealing with each problem one day at a time.

JOHN W. MARTENS

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