# The Christian Century

July 2025

Thoughtful, Independent, Progressive

The Scopes Monkey Trial 100 years later

Repentance rituals at youth group

Remembering Alasdair MacIntyre

## Real life at the border

# POEM FOR THE WEEK

Publishing poetry is a big part of the CENTURY's heritage and ongoing life. Each issue of the magazine includes several new poems, selected and edited by longtime poetry editor Jill Peláez Baumgaertner.

**Now we are sending these poems straight to your inbox. If you sign up for Poem for the Week, each Saturday you will receive an email with a new CC poem, along with exclusive commentary from Jill and related poems to explore.**

*We hope you'll join us for this weekly exploration of new poetry!*

Sign up at christiancentury.org/poetry-email.

# The good kind of patriotism

The church is called to be a loving critic, not a national cheerleader.

by Peter W. Marty

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

On the stucco exterior of Buchenwald concentration camp's main gatehouse, there was a wooden sign. *Recht oder Unrecht mein Vaterland*, it said: My country, right or wrong. The jingoistic ring of this saying—borrowed from 19th-century English—suited the Third Reich well. An uncritical love of country held a warm appeal for the Nazis. Authoritarian governments thrive on the people's unquestioning obedience, and uncritical patriotism usually follows.

Each year as July 4 approaches, I aim to read some piece of American literature that will balance my joy for the goodness of the United States with a reminder of its shadow side. Independence Day has a rightfully celebratory air. The all-night blitzkrieg of neighborhood fireworks isn't for me. But the returning smell of sunscreen, the happiness of neighbors talking to each other outside, the stoking of the cookout grill for friends, Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*, red, white, and blue anything—these are all lovely elements of the Fourth of July.

Amid all this, I want more perspective and a richer sense of history—so I read. Two years ago it was Carol Anderson's book on voter suppression, *One Person, No Vote*. Last year it was Frederick Douglass's address from July 5, 1852, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" This year it's portions of the diary of Daniel S. Butrick, a Presbyterian missionary who was serving the Cherokee people when President Andrew Jackson ordered them to leave their ancestral homes in Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina. A brief excerpt of Butrick's explosive anger over the deadly Trail of Tears westward should make you wince:

> Now, in view of the whole scene, how does the United States government appear? A great Nation, laying aside her dignity, and with thousands of soldiers, and all her great men, and all her mighty men, and all her powerful generals, and with all her civil and military force, chasing a little trembling hare in the wilderness, merely to take its skin and send it off to broil in the scorching deserts of the West. O how noble! How magnanimous! How warlike the achievement! O what a conquest! What booty! How becoming the glory and grandeur of the United States!

If we're open to any kind of patriotism beyond the uncritical variety—say, a constructive patriotism—then we should know these moral failures and injustices well. They're never a joy to articulate, but to acknowledge the pain they present is to enlarge our lives. To think critically about our nation's history and to be excited about taking care of each other is the stuff of thoughtful citizenship.

I preached on and around July 4 for four decades. I'm not sure I ever succeeded in moving large numbers of people to add informed critique to their obvious love of country. But what I'll never tire of believing is this: The role of religion in the public sphere is to be a loving critic of all things legislative, administrative, and judicial, submitting every policy, pronouncement, and law to moral and ethical scrutiny. The church is uniquely poised to declare that patriotism is no substitute for religion, that capitalism and militarism can never be confused with Christianity, and that our first loyalty is to the manger and not the throne. In Henri Nouwen's famous phrase, the church is to be a "living reminder" to the nation that it remembers its past sins, as the means of building a healed and whole future.

So, what kind of patriot shall we be? William Sloane Coffin liked to say there are three kinds, two bad and one good: "The bad patriots are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics of their country. The good patriots are those who carry on a lover's quarrel with their country, a reflection of God's eternal lover's quarrel with the entire world." ❑

AGATA NOWICKA

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**"God's rage will not be held at bay."**

—Cathy George, *page 26*

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ON ART: STEVE NOVICK | VOICES: JORGE GONZÁLEZ







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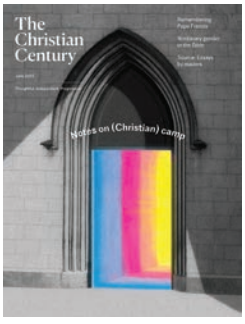
# Letters & Comments




**We welcome responses to our articles. Email us at letters@christiancentury.org or join the conversation on Bluesky (@christiancentury.bsky.social) or Facebook (@ChristianCenturyMagazine).**

## Open hearts

I read Peter Marty's column about Eden Murphy, a teenager born with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, with an ache in my own heart ("A heart broken open," June). Wow. I was immediately in prayer for Eden's recovery, with thanksgiving that I myself am alive. Last August, I had three heart attacks and almost died each time. During my five-week hospital stay, I had pneumonia, quadruple heart surgery, a pacemaker defibrillator installed, and 15 days of COVID. Even with the love of my wife, family, and friends and the care of doctors and countless nurses, there were lonely nights of despair and depression. I felt the pang in my heart—would I survive?

As I write this, my heart again goes out to Eden. I am impressed by her faith in the midst of her challenges: "I have no luxury of stopping. So I press on in hope." This hope is essential for her and for me.

—Rob Morrison
*Jackson, NJ*

## Augustine and antisemitism

I'd like to add one theme to James K. A. Smith's double book review, "Is slavery integral to Augustine's theology?" (June). It is also important to examine Augustine's concept of the perpetual servitude of Jews to Christians, especially in light of the instrumentalized antisemitism inherent in the Heritage Foundation's Project Esther and its use in suppressing free speech in the United States.

Augustine says in his *Answer to Faustus*, "The Christian faithful sees well enough the subjection that the Jews merited when they killed the Lord for their proud kingdom." In *The City of God*, he clarifies his belief that God placed Jews in perpetual servitude to Christians, claiming that "the reason for [God's] forbearing to slay [the Jews] . . . is for fear that they should forget

the Law of God and thus fail to bear convincing witness [to the Church]." He further states that the old covenant from Sinai "is of no value except in so far as it bears witness to the new covenant."

These statements come long after the period when early Jewish followers of Jesus engaged in vigorous arguments about their beliefs and customs in the wake of the destruction of temple-based Judaism. They represent, I think, the beginning of supersessionism and Christian supremacy.

—Barry Stees
*Long Beach, CA*

*Many people want to revert to the world Pauli Murray tried her best to course correct.*

## Pauli Murray's legacy

I knew nothing about Pauli Murray before reading Kelly Brown Douglas's column ("Pauli Murray's song of hope," June). Right after reading it, I turned on the television to a documentary about Murray. It felt like divine intervention. I cried through much of the documentary. I cried for her struggles to be recognized, to be credited and accepted as the genius and human that she was. I cried angry tears because I had never heard her name, because men used her logic to win battles she spent years preparing for. Tears of fear also ran down my face, as I realized that many people in this country want to erase all progress for human rights and to revert to the world Murray tried her best to course correct.

I'm going to share Douglas's column widely. The world should know Pauli Murray, so that no one can erase her legacy.

—Angela C. Johnson
*Atlanta, GA*

## Congratulations to our award winners!

The results are in for the 2024 Best of the Church Press Awards, presented by the Associated Church Press. The CENTURY was the runner-up for best in class, and our contributors and staff were recognized for the following:

**Poetry**

Marjorie Maddox, "Gideons" (January)
Yehiel Poupko, "Five Poems" (April)
Tania Runyan, "Jesus Feeds the Birds" (August)

**Prose**

Timothy Adkins-Jones, In the Lectionary entry for Good Friday (March)
Julian DeShazier, Voices column
Rachel Mann, "Festival of the child" (December)
Malka Z. Simkovich, "To forgive is exclusively divine" (March)
Ragan Sutterfield, "Microbes in the manger" (December)
Morganne Talley, "Black, queer, and Christian" (February)

**Art and design**

Owen Gent, cover illustration (April)
Daniel Richardson, cover design (December)

**Editing**

Jon Mathieu, Letters & Comments
Jessica Mesman, Seen & Heard

## The power of camping

I was pleased to read Meggan Manlove's article "Kindled in the wild" (June), which explores the impact of church camping. Having been involved both as a young camper and later as a pastor and camp counselor, I looked forward to the insights Manlove would offer. While I appreciate the article, I was a bit disappointed that it was so heavy on research and so light on experiences.

I recall with joy several summers at Dunkirk, a camp owned and operated by the Evangelical and Reformed Church (now part of the United Church of Christ) on the shores of Lake Erie. Bright spots include vigorous singing after each meal, stories from a Honduran missionary, some glorious adolescent encounters with emerging sexuality, and quieting vespers. It all made for times of personal enrichment and spiritual pondering.

My pastoral experiences as a camp counselor were mostly canoe camps, traversing more than 100 miles of the Susquehanna River in northeast Pennsylvania. We reassigned paddle partners every day so that each camper experienced each of the others. We took turns setting up the toilet tent—an umbrella and a tarp, suspended from a tree—and provided brief homilies on respect for personal privacy. On the final day we shared about the first impressions we each had of one another and how those impressions evolved over the week.

Manlove's article did help me realize that I could have offered more spiritual growth opportunities as a counselor. I might have emphasized the wonders of creation and introduced the idea of spiritual journeys, perhaps with one reiterated scriptural text throughout the week. As the article suggests, perhaps our evangelical colleagues

have discovered much more purpose to Christian camping than we have.

—Bill Seaman
*Davidson, NC*

## Death as redemption?

I like Katherine Shaner's challenging essay about Weird Barbie in the Sunday's Coming email for the Fourth Sunday of Easter. But in the following week's email she takes the usual path of viewing death as the ultimate show of loyalty to Jesus: "John's Jesus redeems Peter with the reminder to readers that Peter's loyalty this time followed Jesus to death."

I do not think Jesus would have wanted Peter's death to be what redeems his doubting. John's Gospel has a thing about doubt, which has been used by the born-again sects to beat people over the head to prove their faith and salvation again and again. These churches are also at ease casting out people who "backslide" and thus fail to prove their worthiness. But look at what Jesus says: "Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and anyone who comes to me I will never drive away. . . . And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me" (John 6:37–40).

John's Jesus seems to be saying that it is up to the Father who comes to Jesus and that any who do will never be driven away. In other words, once given, you cannot be ungiven. In Acts, Peter finally gets what Jesus was saying, and I believe that his work creating communities of mutual love is what brings full circle his disloyalty before the crucifixion. In fact, had Peter followed Jesus to death at that time, he would not have been alive to help show what it really is to love one's neighbor as oneself.

—Joella Critchfield
*Burnaby, BC, Canada*

**Editors' note:**
To sign up for the Sunday's Coming lectionary emails, visit christiancentury.org/sc.

## Encountering a writer

I discovered Alejandra Oliva's writing a couple of months ago in these pages. I've since read her book *Rivermouth*, followed her writing elsewhere online, and heard her speak at the Tucson Festival of Books. Every time I encounter her I'm left wanting to know more of what she is thinking and writing about. What a gift she brings as she weaves themes of yearning, fear, hope, grace, and presence with the lives she encounters.

—Margaret Gramley
*Sedona, AZ*

*Imitatio Spiritus is a call to share agency with the vulnerable others all around us.*

## Imitating the Spirit

Meg Giordano's reflection on what I read as *imitatio Spiritus* empowered by Christ's love ("The imitation of the Spirit," March) was incredibly timely: I was just finishing Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's *Spirit and Salvation*. Giordano's linguistic musings on "self-aware agency" are a pleasure to consider alongside friendship with God and a startlingly familiar experience of having the Spirit ask, "What do *you* think we should do?" This is a call to liberation-mindedness, to sharing agency with the vulnerable others all around us, just as the Spirit does with us.

In my own journey, the overwhelming siren call of the Spirit brought the beginning of healing for my body and soul, while also cracking open my heart in deeper compassion for others. Compassion is bound to happen when self-protection crumbles to the tune of the Lover of our souls. But it turns out I cannot contain the full measure of the Spirit's generosity in my limited human body. In being broken open for others, I was lured past compassion into the misunderstanding that I had to release all my resources all the time.

Giordano's article might well shake some of us out of complacency, to hook the conscience as the Spirit intercedes on behalf of the vulnerable for the relief of sharing a little of our agency. Others of us must be shaken back into rest, and others shaken toward wiser activities and rhythms. All these are the Spirit's work. I now realize that the Spirit's healing and melting my heart was only the beginning. My heart had been broken in so many ways that needed far more attention than I gave it in order to sustain heartbreaking ministry.

My imperfect way of imitating the Spirit these days means hovering over the chaos without fixing it in an instant. Imitating intercession rather than interaction. In reflecting further on Giordano's proposal, I'm relieved to find that imitating the Spirit is not limited to those with great strength and agency.

—Jazmine Lawrence
*Wolfville, NS, Canada*

# Worse than doing nothing

Congressional leaders have sat silent as Trump runs roughshod over democratic norms. But they readily answered the call to cut Medicaid.

We've seen do-nothing Congresses before, but this is next level. Despite GOP control of both houses, this Congress has passed no major bills. It has kept silent as the White House runs roughshod over the separation of powers. It's not clear what some members are doing with their time when they aren't performing their fealty to President Trump, fundraising for the next election, or refusing to show up to a constituent town hall.

That said, there is one area where they've really put in the work. In May, House leaders whipped votes to squeeze through a budget proposal that takes billions from the poor, gives billions to the rich, and adds trillions to the national debt. (At press time, the Senate was still working on its version.)

We've seen awful budget bills before, but not like this one. Big cuts to both food assistance and Medicaid will do deep harm to millions of lower-income Americans. These cuts will also save a lot of money—or rather they would, were it not for the even bigger tax breaks for people earning more than $500,000 a year. Other provisions will end climate programs, quadruple the budget for detaining migrants, and more.

Medicaid cuts will hit hardest in rural areas, where nearly half the children rely on the program and so do struggling hospitals. Rural Americans tend to vote Republican. So why is a do-nothing GOP Congress working so hard to do, of all things, this?

Clearly some members are motivated by small-government ideology, a worldview in which "balance the budget" is mostly just a euphemism for cutting social services. Indeed, the drama around the House vote was due primarily to holdouts who wanted even more cuts to Medicaid, and a parallel conflict has since emerged on the Senate side.

But the larger issue is who the Republican members serve. We're long past the problem of legislators who answer only to their supporters, ignoring their other constituents. Today most of them serve Trump alone. The congressional majority has relinquished its constitutional role in favor of being an extension of the president and his will. And what the president wants is his "big, beautiful bill."

*Why would GOP members vote for a budget that hurts their own supporters? Because most of them don't serve the people anymore.*

In fairness, this uncritical support for Trump is the main thing many GOP voters demand of their representatives these days. So members who want to avoid a primary challenge—or to fend off threats of violence—have a strong incentive to fall in line.

But Congress doesn't exist simply to find out what most of the people want and then do it. Its members aren't mere messengers; that isn't what legislating is, not in a republic like ours. Certainly legislators draw from the values and views they share with the people who voted them in. But Americans have long expected them to draw as well from their own judgment, experience, and wisdom—not just their poll data. Evading this responsibility is never good for civic health. When the poll data indicates support for the president even when he breaks the law, such evasion is outright dangerous.

We are living through a constitutional crisis, and it's not clear how it will end. But there is one entity that could quickly, decisively put a stop to this administration's abuses of power, and that's Congress. Doing so will require members to look beyond their immediate incentives for deeper sources of motivation—to locate whatever's left of their conscience, their patriotism, their sense of vocation, and their courage. ❑

# Seen & Heard

*What the CC editors are reading and paying attention to*

### Pope Leo vs. AI

Pope Leo XIV has established AI as an early focus of his papacy, signaling that the church might respond to the challenges it poses for human justice and dignity. The previous Pope Leo led the church after the industrial revolution, in which the new pope seems to see an analogue for our time. In remarks to explain his choice of name, Leo XIV recalled Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum novarum*, which elevated the sacredness and dignity of workers amid political and social change. He says the church can offer "the treasury of her social teaching" in response to "another industrial revolution" (*The Washington Post*, May 16).

### March of the Friends

A group of Quakers walked more than 300 miles from New York City to Washington, DC, to demonstrate against the Trump administration's immigration policies. Historically, members of the Religious Society of Friends have engaged in peaceful protests as part of their commitment to justice and peace. Earlier this year, Quakers also sued the federal government over immigration agents' ability to make arrests at houses of worship. Organizers of the Quaker Walk to Washington said they wanted to show solidarity with migrants and other groups that are being targeted by the administration. They also wanted to deliver a copy of the Flushing Remonstrance—a 17th-century document that calls for religious freedom—to the US Capitol, saying it remains relevant in 2025 (RNS, May 12).

**Costly incarceration**

The US carceral system holds nearly

**2 million** people in

**98** federal prisons,

**1,566** state prisons,

**3,116** local jails,

**1,277** juvenile correctional facilities,

**133** immigration detention facilities,

**80** Indian country jails, and other facilities, all at an annual cost of at least

**$182 billion**

SOURCE: Prison Policy Initiative

### Would you like tuition with that?

Sipping Streams Tea Company has launched a college tuition benefit for its student employees. Under the program, employees of the Fairbanks, Alaska–based small business can earn three college tuition credits, up to $5,250 per employee per year, tax free. Founded in 2007 by Jenny Tse, a high school math teacher, the tea company now has four full-time employees and a few part-time employees. All these employees can accrue the benefit, and employees who aren't yet 18 years old can accrue credits for when they are. "It brings me deep joy to help people fulfill their dreams, if I can," Tse said (*Alaska Business*, April 9).

### Endangered schools

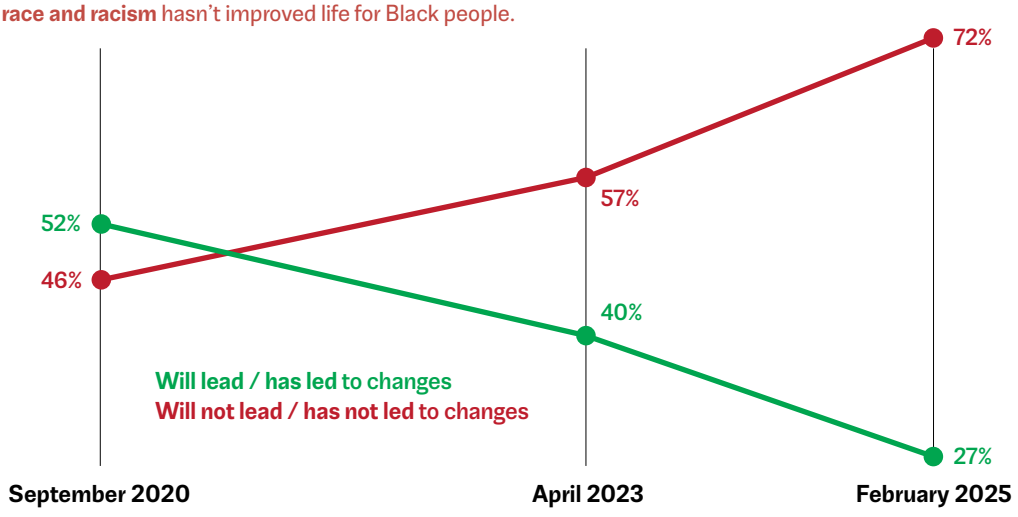
Since 2020, 79 nonprofit colleges and universities have closed or merged or announced that they will. More than half were religiously affiliated. More than 30 religious schools that are still in business are considered "not financially responsible." Small religious schools in rural states, in particular, are shutting down at an accelerating rate, and their troubles threaten to further diminish access to higher education for rural students. With falling numbers of college applicants, especially in the Midwest, "we just don't have the demographics anymore," said Amy Novak, president of St. Ambrose University in Iowa, commenting on her institution's merger with nearby Mount Mercy University. For many other small, religiously affiliated institutions, time has already run out (NPR, May 18).

### Clean energy is good business

The Trump administration may slow down clean energy, but the industry has built up enough momentum that he can't stop it, says *Vox* climate correspondent Umair Irfan. Alternative power sources like wind, solar, and batteries are getting cheaper, more efficient, and more abundant. In some US markets, installing new renewable energy is cheaper than running existing coal plants. Last year was the first in which the US produced more electricity from wind and solar power than from coal. If the US decides to slow its head start, its competitors may take the lead (*Vox*, April 21).

## After George Floyd

Five years after George Floyd was murdered, most Americans think the **increased attention to race and racism** hasn't improved life for Black people.




Source: Pew Research Center

Note: Respondents who did not answer are not included.

### Free markets

Free grocery stores, like food pantries and community fridges, offer food at no cost to community members, but they do so in spaces that are bright, open, and filled with shelves and fridges holding a mix of food and household items, where customers choose what they want—just like at a regular market. While some free grocery stores—like Unity Shoppe in Santa Barbara and World Harvest in Los Angeles—have been around for a while, more are popping up. The Pratt Free Market in Baltimore is a library-based free grocery store, pitched by M'balu Bangura when she began her role as the library's chief of equity and fair practices during COVID. "Seeing people hungry just never sat right with me," said Bangura. "People shouldn't have to stress about this" (*Civil Eats*, April 14).

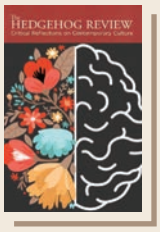
### Lost holy ground

The Supreme Court rejected an appeal challenging a massive copper mining project in Arizona that would destroy Oak Flat, a sacred site used for Apache ceremonies. The nonprofit group Apache Stronghold asserted that its members' religious rights will be violated if the Resolution Copper mine goes forward. The Trump administration has declared its support for the project. Project managers have said that "ongoing dialogue" with the Apache "will continue to shape the project." Wendsler Nosie Sr., a member of Apache Stronghold, said the fight would continue (NBC News, May 27).

# "I am the conscience that remained when all others died."

—Palestinian journalist Doha Al-Saifi, whose three children were killed in an Israeli strike in Gaza (X, May 22)

### TINY EXCERPT




Smarts are pragmatic by nature—and that's all they are. The intelligent man or woman makes sure the pragmatic plans line up with moral aspirations. Someone who is smart, smart, smart without ideals will almost certainly do harm. He'll be a doctrinaire pragmatist: someone who thinks that truth is what gets you what you want, without thinking too much about the value of the objective. Becoming intelligent, to me, means seeking to understand the Good and then, to the best of one's ability, living and acting in accordance with it. Wisdom? . . . It takes experience, it takes intelligence; to be smart doesn't hurt, but it may not actually matter all that much in the quest for wisdom.

—from "**Beyond Elon**" by Mark Edmundson (*Hedgehog Review*, March 4)

# "It doesn't seem right, calling the pope Bob."

—Dianne Bergant, who taught Pope Leo when he was a student named Robert Prevost—and known as Bob—at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago (*US Catholic*, May 9)

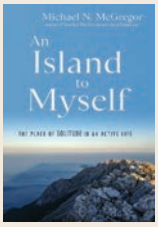
## Who rebuilds Altadena?

Since flames destroyed thousands of homes in Altadena in January, more than 80 property owners in the mostly middle-class Southern California community have sold rather than rebuild. Many of the new buyers are developers, and locals are raising concerns that gentrification will wipe out the diversity that has been an Altadena hallmark. Even before the fires, rising home prices were pushing out Black residents. Price escalation is common after destruction by fire or hurricane, as families sell to buyers who build more expensive homes. In a bid to stop price increases, nonprofits are trying to help residents remain in Altadena through grants that help homeowners to rebuild or buy land. They plan to sell any new construction to people from Altadena at prices they can afford (*Los Angeles Times*, May 2).

## Monumental woman

Responses to British artist Thomas J. Price's sculpture *Grounded in the Stars*, a 12-foot statue of a Black woman on view in Times Square earlier this summer, were mixed. Price makes bronze sculptures of Black men and women that seem like people you might encounter walking down the street, despite their grand scale. Their cold, regal gazes recall ancient statuary, which Price cites as his inspiration. Some complained that the sculpture drew on racial stereotypes like the figure of the Black mammy, while others were offended that the statue dwarfed the permanent monuments to white men that stand nearby. Price acknowledged that he sees the sculptures as a response to the ongoing debate about monuments: "We know what they're supposed to look like, and this doesn't look like that," he said. His work can be seen as a counter-monument to the statues of people connected to colonization and enslavement still found all over the world (*Art News*, May 12).

**TINY EXCERPT**




One of the greatest difficulties in entering solitude is letting yourself simply be there. Most of us live lives in which external things drive our days. If we don't have something we have to do, we turn to an external source to fill our time. I don't mean entertainment only. Even running errands or talking to a friend can be little more than distraction from being alone with ourselves. So often, when faced with an empty hour, we reach for something to fill it rather than letting ourselves simply be in the world, listening and waiting and trusting what comes.

—from ***An Island to Myself: The Place of Solitude in an Active Life***, by Michael N. McGregor (Monkfish)

## Graves of the enslaved

South Carolina's Mepkin Abbey, home to Trappist monks, has blessed a new meditation garden honoring the African Americans who were enslaved on their property. Jacques Fabre-Jeune, the first Black Catholic bishop in South Carolina, celebrated the ceremony in late April. Built in the 1760s, the former Mepkin Plantation was home to Henry Laurens—a founding father whose wealth came largely from his involvement in the slave trade—and to some 300 enslaved people. It was later purchased by Henry and Clare Booth Luce, who donated most of the land to the Trappists. The cemetery is the burial site of the Luces and of Henry Laurens and his son, John Laurens, an abolitionist who fought in the Revolution. Twenty unmarked graves, believed to house the remains of workers enslaved by Henry Laurens, were discovered in 2024 (*Black Catholic Messenger*, May 19).

## Honoring Clarence Darrow

Every year, a few dozen people gather at the Clarence Darrow Memorial Bridge in Chicago's Jackson Park to celebrate the attorney and activist best known for his part in the Scopes Monkey Trial, a landmark case in US history. This year's event honored the 100th anniversary of the trial, during which Darrow defended Scopes, who was accused of breaking a Tennessee law banning the theory of evolution from being taught in schools. Standing near the bridge, participants read excerpts from Darrow's defense, including: "Here, we find today as brazen and as bold an attempt to destroy learning as was ever made in the Middle Ages." The ceremony was followed by a symposium on book- and idea-banning still happening in schools across the country (Block Club Chicago, March 14).

## Gaming politics

Gamers who stream their political opinions on Twitch and other platforms may be reshaping the electorate. In a survey of US adults, 61 percent reported playing games for at least one hour every week, and gaming culture has bled into politics. Trump's campaign courted streamers to

# "We were worried for our daughter's safety in Israel. But she was murdered three days before going."

—Robert Milgrim, whose daughter Sarah Milgrim was killed May 21 by a gunman targeting an American Jewish Committee event in Washington, DC (*New York Times*, May 22)

reach a young, largely male constituency that helped decide the election. Hasan Piker, a popular leftist Twitch streamer, has been enlisted by Sen. Bernie Sanders and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to help rally opposition to Trump. When Elon Musk, also a devoted gamer, described DOGE as *speedrunning*, he was using gamer slang for beating a game more quickly than its creators intended—or in this case, dismantling our government more quickly than anyone thought possible (*The Atlantic*, April 25).


AP PHOTO / JON SUPER

## Wrestling with God

Gareth Thompson has come up with a new way to combat declining church attendance: WWE-style wrestling. St. Peter's Anglican church in Shipley, a town in northern England, now hosts an event called Wrestling Church. A typical event features a brief homily and prayer followed by two hours of wrestling, sometimes with a baptism in between bouts of fighting. Thompson, who attributes his salvation to both God and wrestling, draws thematic comparisons between the sport and Christianity: storytelling, the fight between good and evil, and the need to suspend disbelief (AP, April 4).

## Contagious courage

*From Glennon Doyle's interview with Mariann Budde, the Episcopal bishop who asked Trump to be merciful during her sermon after his inauguration* (We Can Do Hard Things, *Episode 409)*

**Doyle:** It's so interesting to think about that moment . . . in the pulpit as being a moment where you're jumping off the diving board and you don't know what's gonna happen after.

**Budde:** Courage is contagious, right? . . . Leading up to the day, I heard that the Catholic bishops in California came out with this incredibly strong statement against the proposed immigration policies of the then president-elect, and I thought, they're doing it, right? . . . I was like, OK, I wanna be with them. . . . We're all waiting for those moments of time where we see people doing something brave, and it's like, there it is. I think I'll do that too. . . .

**Doyle:** The little things matter. . . . Your flag in front might seem like nothing, but it's signaling to people. . . .

**Budde:** I mean, there have been times in our history where there just wasn't any clear movement toward whatever justice or freedom people were longing for, but . . . the struggle was kept alive, right? Torch by torch, person by person. . . . It may feel like we failed, but whatever we did might have had an impact on someone who then goes on to do the thing that we had hoped to see realized, but we weren't the ones.

# News

CHURCH LEADERSHIP

## Inside the conclave: How the Americas paved the way for Pope Leo XIV

by Claire Giangravé
Religion News Service

Tables and chairs line the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican in preparation for the conclave in early May.

VATICAN MEDIA

**Three conclaves** set the stage for the moment when Pope Leo XIV stepped out onto the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica, stunning the world as the first US-born pontiff: the conclave depicted in a quiet Oscar-nominated movie, the conclave envisioned by the media frenzy, and the actual secret votes of a College of Cardinals who barely knew each other.

The first, the award-winning *Conclave* starring Ralph Fiennes and Stanley Tucci, portrayed a group of conniving cardinals vying for political power. The second conclave was the one predicted by the media, which descended on the Eternal City. Lists of *papabili*, or contenders to become pope, stories of intrigue and polarization, smear campaigns aimed at tarnishing the reputation of the cardinals—they all raised the stakes, giving the watching world a scene to match the one on the silver screen.

But six cardinal electors interviewed for this story, some under the condition of anonymity, all insisted the election of Pope Leo XIV was poles apart from the versions depicted by Hollywood and predicted by the media.

"I imagined it would be different," said Jaime Spengler, archbishop of Porto Alegre in Brazil, who had been a cardinal for only six months and was unsure of what to expect from the conclave. Instead, he said, "we truly had a space of fraternity, faith, prayer and silence that you cannot imagine."

For these conclave participants, the name of Cardinal Robert Prevost emerged as if "breathed from the Holy Spirit," without kingmakers or campaigners.

But the cardinals agreed it was the Americas, North and South, who first backed the Chicago-born prelate, gaining momentum over the four votes as they offered a compromise candidate to the fragmented camps.

Pope Francis would often urge faithful to "make a mess," and even in death, Francis was a disrupter within the institution, having radically transformed the College of Cardinals to lasting consequence. He created the most geographically diverse crop of cardinals in the church's history, representing 71 nations on five continents. He also gave red hats to places that have never had a cardinal before, such as Mongolia and South Sudan.

Francis held few meetings of cardinals at the Vatican, so many of them were strangers when they met to elect his successor. Most cardinals had never participated in a conclave before, and their inexperience allowed them to walk into the secret gathering with a willingness—even a desire—to be awed.

Most of the cardinals interviewed for this story were profoundly moved by Francis's funeral and the overwhelming display of love, affection, and gratitude of the faithful who came from around the world. A cardinal's job is to get people interested in Jesus Christ, one cardinal said, and the sight of people lining up for hours to pay their respects to Francis was an encouraging sign that the church is still relevant today.

They walked into the conclave mindful of the responsibility to elect someone who could capture the attention brought by Francis's death.

As the cardinals gathered for general congregations before the conclave, there were few faces they immediately recognized. After the first day, they asked for name tags to identify each other, and they were given a book from the Vatican with biographies of each cardinal. When someone stepped forward to speak to the congregation, a large picture of them would appear on the screen behind them, and the cardinals would quickly check to learn more about who was speaking.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican secretary of state under Francis, was an immediately recognizable name and face. So was Cardinal Angelo Becciu, whose name was at the center of a financial scandal that led to Francis stripping him of his cardinal rights, including participating in the conclave.

Cardinal Prevost also gave a speech at the general congregations, the cardinals confirmed, but they didn't remember much of what he said. "It was the way he engaged in the smaller groups" that was impressive, one said. Plus, he was a familiar face to the cardinals, having served in an influential role at the helm of the Vatican department overseeing bishops.

AP PHOTO / DOMENICO STINELLIS

Pope Leo XIV tours St. Peter's Square on his popemobile prior to the inaugural mass of his pontificate, May 18, at the Vatican.

When the doors of the Sistine Chapel were closed, following a 45-minute homily by Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa, the cardinals cast their initial votes.

Parolin emerged with a substantial number of votes, between 40 and 50, but far from the 89 needed to achieve a two-thirds majority. Hungarian cardinal Péter Erdö also had some support behind him, the cardinals said, especially from conservative cardinals who appreciated his emphasis on doctrine, tradition, and clarity.

Surprisingly, the more progressive prelates failed to build consensus behind a candidate.

Maltese cardinal Mario Grech, Filipino cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, and even the up-and-coming Cardinal Pablo Virgilio David, also of the Philippines, could not muster more than a handful of votes.

But a sizable number of votes coalesced behind Prevost, leading many cardinals to take a second look. It became clear that Prevost, who served for more than two decades in Peru before coming to the Vatican, had garnered support among the 21 Latin American cardinals, representing 18 percent of the votes. But there were also US cardinals who knew him and promoted him early on.

Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin of Newark had a long-standing relationship with Prevost and, in the days leading up to the conclave, told journalists he believed Prevost had a good chance of becoming pope.

Some of the more conservative US cardinals had put their weight behind Erdö in the first vote but were quick to shift gears once it became clear Prevost was gaining momentum. There were 16 cardinals from North America at the conclave, ten from the US and six from Canada, and most ultimately rallied behind the cardinal from the Americas.

The support behind Parolin was fragmented and easily swayed, according to the participants interviewed for this story. Some cardinals opposed Parolin's leadership role in signing a controversial agreement with China on the appointment of bishops, while others were critical of his handling of financial scandals in the Vatican. But most of all, the experienced diplomat and Vatican bureaucrat was not what the faithful had so clearly asked for in the wake of Francis's death: a pope who could also be a pastor.

As one Vatican observer said, "sometimes a great number two doesn't necessarily make a great number one." And so the votes for Parolin, mostly curial

members and Catholic moderates, began to shift toward Prevost.

Prevost had plenty of pastoral experience. Between 1985 and 1998 he was a missionary in Peru, serving the poor and Indigenous communities there. In 2015, Francis made him bishop of the Diocese of Chiclayo in the northwestern region of Peru. And he had proven management skills as head of the Augustinian Order between 2001 and 2013 and as head of the Vatican's department overseeing bishops.

He had also visited 47 countries where the Augustinian Order was present, giving him insight into the reality of the church on the ground around the world. Cardinals appreciated his leadership method—quiet and listening yet decisive.

Conservative cardinals found comfort in his background as a mathematician, theologian, and canon lawyer, while more progressive cardinals looked hopefully at his interest in social justice issues. "He seemed to check all the boxes," said Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago in an interview with NPR.

"His name just emerged, there was no effort on his part or anyone else's to promote this. But as we looked at all the qualities that we identified, he seemed to make a good fit," he added.

The only tick against him was being born in the United States, which in the past would have automatically excluded a cardinal from being a candidate for the papacy to avoid combining the church's spiritual authority with the political influence of a global superpower.

But next to the other US cardinals, with their larger-than-life charisma and stature to match, Prevost was small and shy. Cupich said Prevost "identified very much as Peruvian," where he became a naturalized citizen in 2015.

As cardinals rallied behind Prevost, including a number from Asia and Africa, they recognized in him someone who could straddle the developing and developed worlds. He could speak with authority to the existential demands of the West, grappling with technological revolutions and identity wars, while also recognizing the priorities of countries ravaged by famine, poverty, war, and climate change.

When Pope Leo XIV was elected with more than 100 votes, applause erupted from the cardinals in the conclave. After so many years of the media presenting the church as divided, the cardinals had achieved a peaceful transition of power in just four ballots over two days.

The new pope was not just deft at overcoming geographical divides but also offered a compromise between differing views on the future of the church. Both progressive and conservative cardinals said that with the election of Leo they had "dodged a bullet," suggesting a concern the conclave could have tipped to one extreme or the other.

"We have someone who knows us and is aware of our challenges, knows our possibilities and potential," Spengler said. "I think the church can advance under him in communion and unity." □

REFUGEES

## South African bishop thanks Episcopal leader for declining to resettle White Afrikaners

by Jack Jenkins
Religion News Service

**The leader of** Anglican churches in South Africa thanked the head of the Episcopal Church in the US for refusing to resettle White Afrikaners who have been deemed refugees by President Donald Trump's administration, arguing that the government's justification for taking in members of the group is inaccurate.

In a May 15 letter to TEC presiding bishop Sean W. Rowe, Thabo Makgoba, archbishop of Cape Town and head of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa, lauded Rowe for announcing that his church would end its decades-long relationship with the US government to resettle refugees. Rowe explained the decision was rooted in moral opposition to being asked


White South Africans demonstrate in support of US president Donald Trump in front of the US embassy in Pretoria, South Africa, February 15.

AP PHOTO / JEROME DELAY, FILE

to resettle White Afrikaners, especially given that the US refugee program has been mostly shut down since Trump took office in January.

In his letter, Makgoba thanked Rowe for calling him ahead of the announcement, and he rejected the Trump administration's arguments for accepting White Afrikaners, who the administration has insisted are the target of genocide—a claim widely disputed by the South African government as well as faith leaders in the country.

Makgoba argued that White South Africans "remain the beneficiaries of apartheid" by "every measure of economic and social privilege," noting that, despite the end of the apartheid regime, South Africa's society remains deeply unequal.

"Measured by the Gini coefficient, which measures income disparity, we are the most unequal society in the world, with the majority of the poor Black, and the majority of the wealthy white," Makgoba wrote.

"While U.S. supporters of the South African group will no doubt highlight individual cases of suffering some members might have undergone, and criticize TEC for its action, we cannot agree that South Africans who have lost the privileges they enjoyed under apartheid should qualify for refugee status ahead of people fleeing war and persecution from countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and Afghanistan."

The letter came as 59 White Afrikaners arrived in the United States. Episcopal Migration Ministries had long been one of ten groups—seven of which are faith-based—that partner with the federal government to resettle refugees. It will now wind down its existing contracts by the end of this fiscal year.

White House spokesperson Anna Kelly condemned the decision, saying it raised serious questions about the denomination's "supposed commitment" to humanitarian aid.

"President Trump has made it clear: refugee resettlement should be about need, not politics," Kelly said in a statement.

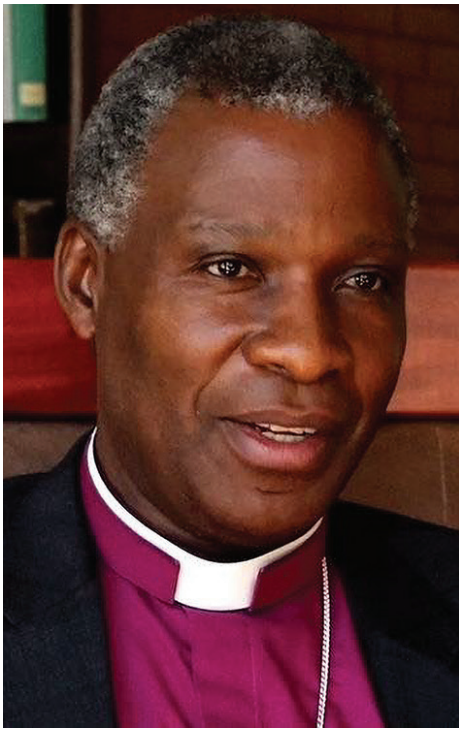
Rowe defended the decision during a May 14 appearance on CNN, telling Anderson Cooper that the Afrikaners appear to be the only refugees allowed into the country since Trump took office, despite thousands of others seeking entry being locked in limbo. Rowe also suggested that the Afrikaners were vetted over the course of months instead of the normal yearslong application process to become a refugee.

"I agree—it should be about need," Rowe said on CNN. "As you've reported, look at the thousands of people fleeing war and violence. . . . People who have helped our military that are being left in camps on a daily basis, while White Afrikaners have been fast-tracked. . . . This is about people who have jumped the line."

A State Department spokesperson did not answer specific questions regarding the vetting process for Afrikaner refugees, saying instead, "We are unable to comment on individual cases, but eligible individuals are moving through the process of refugee resettlement."

A spokesperson for the US Department of Health and Human Services, which helps orchestrate resettlement, said the agency will "use current and available funding to resettle Afrikaner refugees" and has been coordinating their placement with "current grant recipients that receive Preferred Communities Program funding"—that is, the resettlement agencies that partner with the government.

Of the original seven faith-based resettlement groups, five continue to partner with the government—in April the US Conference of Catholic Bishops ended its partnership, citing the government's suspension of the program, which resulted in widespread layoffs across resettlement agencies. All five have indicated they intend to continue to resettle refugees allowed into the country, with at least two—Church World Service and World Relief—confirming that they will resettle small numbers of Afrikaners.



Thabo Makgoba, archbishop of Cape Town and head of the Anglican Church of Southern Africa

However, CWS, World Relief, and other faith-based resettlement groups remain vocally critical of the government's halting of the refugee program, with four of them filing two separate lawsuits against the government earlier this year.

Tim Young, a spokesperson for Global Refuge, formerly known as Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, said in an X post that among the plaintiffs in its ongoing lawsuit is a Christian refugee who fled to South Africa to escape violence in her home country, Congo. She was approved to travel to the US, but, unlike White Afrikaners, is now unable to enter the country.

"Her family is already in the U.S. eagerly awaiting her," Young wrote. "She was approved to travel, but the refugee program was suspended and she can't be with her grieving mother as they mourn the loss of her brother." ❑

FACEBOOK

CHURCH FINANCES

# UMC bishops given retroactive raise after requesting pay freeze

by Heather Hahn
UM News

**In a highly unusual move,** the board of the United Methodist Church's finance agency voted April 25 to give the denomination's bishops a 3 percent salary increase that will be retroactive to January this year.

The vote by the board of the General Council on Finance and Administration, during its online spring meeting, comes after a majority of bishops late last year asked to forgo a pay hike amid budget cuts denomination-wide.

"The GCFA Board considered several new factors that have emerged since the previous discussion," said Sheila B. Ahler, chair of the board's General Agency and Episcopal Matters Committee, which deals with budgetary matters. "These include the increased workload for bishops, due to a decrease in their numbers and significant economic changes that have notably impacted the cost of living."

Bishops' salaries vary by region. Retroactive to January, US bishops each will make $186,327. In Africa and the Philippines, the bishops will each make $91,555. The European bishops' salaries will range from $69,063 to $144,768.

The overall additional cost for the salary increase is a total of $270,000 for the 53 active bishops worldwide. The US has 32; Europe and the Philippines each have three bishops; and the African continent will have 15 bishops by the end of July when a new episcopal area is added in mid-Africa.

The full GCFA board has final say on bishops' compensation as part of its role overseeing the denomination's Episcopal Fund which supports their work. Usually the board approves any changes in pay in late summer or fall when it finalizes spending plans for the coming year.

Initially in mid-2024, the board's General Agency and Episcopal Matters Committee considered recommending a 3.5 percent pay raise to the full board. But as discussions of the Episcopal Fund spending plan progressed, that recommendation fell by the wayside.

However, Ahler told the board that in recent months, her committee has had discussions with bishops and GCFA staff to consider revisiting the pay question.

Staff informed the committee that both the Society for Human Resource Management and PayScale, an industry leader in compensation management, projected a 3.5 percent average pay increase for workers this year. The bishops as well as staff of the denomination's general agencies are also experiencing a 12.9 percent increase in health insurance premiums this year.

Ahler told the board during its April 25 meeting that the committee expected to revisit the pay question in developing recommendations for the Episcopal Fund's 2026 spending plan. But after her report, board member Ken Ow made a motion for the board to go into closed session to further discuss bishops' pay.

Most of their conversation was then held in a separate online space. Discussions of personnel matters are among the exceptions to the UMC's open meetings policy in the Book of Discipline, the denomination's law book.

The two bishops on the board—David Graves and Thomas Bickerton—recused themselves from the board's discussion and vote on the salary increase.

"The GAEM Committee respects the board's final authority and decision-making process in setting episcopal compensation and remains committed to its advisory role in supporting transparent and equitable financial practices within our church," Ahler said.

The board's decision comes as many across the UMC are adjusting to smaller budgets and larger workloads.

After the disaffiliation of about a quarter of US churches, the general conference in 2024 passed a historically low four-year budget of between $353.6 million and $373.4 million, depending on collection rates in 2025 and 2026. The 2025–2028 budget represents about a 40 percent reduction of the previous denominational budget which the general conference passed in 2016.

That budget also reduced the number of bishops overall, with the number of US bishops dropping from 39 to 32 even as two more bishops are added to Africa, where the denomination is growing. ❑

A procession of United Methodist bishops at the 2024 UMC general conference on April 23, 2024, in Charlotte, North Carolina

MIKE DUBOSE, UM NEWS, FILE

ANTISEMITISM

# How a Holocaust denier turned antisemitism into a crypto coin

by Benyamin Cohen
*The Forward*

**There's a long history** of hate groups using new technologies to spread their message. In the 1930s, it was radio. In the 2010s, it was social media. In 2025, it might be crypto.

Enter $JPROOF, a new meme coin launched in April by Stew Peters, a far-right podcaster and outspoken Holocaust denier with a large online following. On paper, it's just another token in a sea of barely coherent blockchain projects. But peel back even a single layer, and you'll find something much darker: a coin literally branded as "Jew Proof," marketed to Peters's followers as a weapon against "usurious Jewish bankers."

The coin has been floating around the extremist corners of the internet since earlier this spring. But it gained broader attention after Mohammad "Mo" Khan, a Temple University student suspended over an antisemitic incident at a Philadelphia bar, made an appearance on Peters's podcast in May. The two chatted about "Jewish supremacy," and then Peters offered Khan one million $JPROOF tokens, worth roughly $100,000.

A meme coin is a kind of cryptocurrency that usually begins as a joke, a stunt, or a tool for hype. Unlike Bitcoin or other digital assets that try to solve real-world financial problems, meme coins often serve no purpose beyond grabbing attention—and sometimes making money for the people who create them.

If you have a large audience and some tech know-how, you can spin up your own meme coin in a matter of hours. Promote it on social media, push your fans to buy in, and if the price spikes, you cash out.

"I think it's much more of a get-rich-quick scheme than an actual investment," said Mike Rothschild, author of *Jewish Space Lasers: The Rothschilds and 200 Years of Conspiracy Theories*. "You can create one of these things


A recent price ticker for the new far-right crypto meme coin $JPROOF

SOURCE: X

## In brief

In an open letter, ten former presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention argued that the denomination should not defund its public policy arm, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. While admitting that the commission could be improved, they wrote that a "sledgehammer is not the tool for adjusting a mirror." The SBC has voted three times on whether to disband or defund the commission. Critics of the commission say it is out of touch with local Southern Baptists and lacks close ties to the Trump administration. Much of the criticism began when the commission was led by Russell Moore, who openly criticized Trump.

—Religion News Service

Critics of President Trump's newly formed Religious Liberty Commission argue that it caters exclusively to the concerns of evangelicals. It does, however, include six Jewish appointees: four Orthodox rabbis and two leaders at right-wing advocacy groups. While the Orthodox are a minority among US Jews, they are among the strongest of Trump's supporters: more than 70 percent say they approve of the job he is doing. In a statement, commission appointee Dovid Zwiebel, a rabbi and executive vice president of a Haredi Orthodox group, said that growing secularity made it important that "we stand vigilant in protecting our first freedom—religious liberty."

—Jewish Telegraphic Agency

A 14th-century Korean Buddhist statue stolen from a Japanese temple in 2012 was returned in May after a yearslong legal battle over its ownership. Thieves took the 20-inch gilt bronze statue intending to sell it to South Korea. Dozens of temple members and local residents stood along the road and applauded as the statue, a designated cultural asset, was returned to the temple. It is expected to be kept in a local museum.

—Associated Press

and make some money fairly quickly by very quickly fleecing the immediate following that you have."

Peters, a former bounty hunter turned fringe media figure, has spent years building an online brand rooted in COVID-19 denialism, antisemitic conspiracy theories, and hateful rhetoric. He's called Judaism "a death cult built on the blood of murdered babies," and he recently proposed a "final solution" to deport Jews from the US.

$JPROOF is the latest evolution of that worldview—and a new attempt to monetize it.

Peters describes the token as "the start of a movement to break free from the Rothschild-run banking cabal."

"The idea that this one Jewish family owns all the central banks is this very powerful idea," said Rothschild, who is not related to the well-known banking family. "But it's based on having absolutely no understanding of how banking works."

The $JPROOF website includes Nazi-era imagery and talk of "crooked Jews." "I do find this to be particularly unique," said Phoenix Berman, an investigative researcher at the Anti-Defamation League's Center on Extremism.

Berman said that Peters used the controversy surrounding Khan to amplify his nascent cryptocurrency. "He is a purveyor of hate," she said. "And bringing Khan onto his platform, promoting antisemitic conspiracy theories and narratives—it's his bread and butter. It's what he likes to do."

Berman said the exchange was also part of a larger pattern. "This is overall sending a message that bigotry is not only permissible in society, but potentially financially lucrative."

For many hate groups, cryptocurrency isn't just a convenience—it's the ideology.

"White supremacists and antisemites will use cryptocurrency as an alternative to conventional financial institutions that they believe are controlled by Jews," Berman explained. "Some of these extremists may be kicked off of mainstream payment processing platforms and banking institutions, so sometimes they're cornered into a situation where they have to turn to cryptocurrency."

Earlier this year, the Proud Boys—a right-wing extremist group that played an integral role in the January 6, 2021, insurrection—launched its own meme coin.

And while $JPROOF may be one of the first openly antisemitic crypto coins, Berman said it's part of a disturbing trend. "Cryptocurrency is a way for extremists like Stew Peters to profit off their hate," she said. She also noted that "rug-pull" scams—in which a coin's creator takes the money and vanishes—are "fairly common in the cryptocurrency token market."

For his part, Peters said, "This is a coin that will never be rug-pulled," adding that he is "never going to sell it" and "it will never crash."

The surge of politically themed crypto projects hasn't been limited to the fringe. Traders who bought Melania Trump's new coin before its official launch made more than $100 million, according to an investigation published in May by the *Financial Times*.

These tokens suggest that crypto is becoming an increasingly common tool for politics, identity, and outrage. And for some, like Stew Peters, it's a direct line to fund and fuel hate.

"As long as there are people willing to believe in it," Rothschild said, "there will be more coins like it." ❑

*This story originally appeared in* The Forward *(forward.com). To get* The Forward*'s free email newsletters delivered to your inbox, go to forward.com/newsletter-signup.*

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

## Salvatore Enzo Del Brocco to lead Catholic Theological Union

by Dawn Araujo-Hawkins

Catholic Theological Union's board of trustees has appointed Salvatore Enzo Del Brocco the next president of the 57-year-old Chicago-based institution. The Passionist priest succeeds Barbara Reid, a Dominican sister, who became president of CTU in 2021.

Del Brocco has served as adjunct professor of ethics at CTU since July 2024. Though born in the US, he joined the Passionist order in Italy in 1991 and was ordained a priest there in 1996. Del Brocco holds a master's degree in human resources and a doctorate in healthcare ethics. He has led preaching retreats across the globe and is fluent in six languages.

In a statement, board chair Thomas P. Brown hailed Del Brocco's global background. "With his extensive work and leadership experience outside the United States, and his multilingual skills, working collaboratively across borders and interculturally is second nature to him."

In the same statement, Del Brocco said helping to form leaders equipped to promote unity would be one of the goals of his presidency.

"In a world increasingly marked by fragmentation, conflict, and polarization, we urgently need leaders who can bridge divides, care for our common home, and foster a culture of peace and solidarity," he said. ❑

CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL UNION VIA FACEBOOK

ACTIVISM

# These Mormon women are giving their legislators a piece of their mind—one quilt square at a time

by Yonat Shimron
Religion News Service

**The card holders** on the long dining room table offered guidance to the women assembled around it: "Keep it Constitutional" and "Keep it Kind."

With those themes in mind, about ten women sat down and, using beige or light blue fabric pieces and colorful markers, crafted messages to their state representative or senator:

"Checks and balances are vital to protect the power of Congress."

"We the People"

"Rule of law for all"

"Everyone deserves due process."

Their 10×10 fabric pieces were later stitched together to form a quilt—one of 57 presented to members of Congress on May 7. The handiwork of these women, who assembled in a suburban North Carolina home in April, was part of Peace by Piece, an interfaith project led by the group Mormon Women for Ethical Government.

The nonpartisan group wanted to find a way to express its concerns about abuses of the democratic system the president and lawmakers were elected to protect. They zeroed in on the First Article of the Constitution, which defines the powers of Congress, and encouraged their 8,500 members across the country and partners, including the Jewish group A More Perfect Union, to join them.

"Our religion is very much about the Constitution and the rule of law," said Stephanie Hawver of Durham, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who wrote messages on a quilt to present to Republican senator Ted Budd of North Carolina.

"When we see things going on against that, we need to do something, but do it in a peaceful way because the idea is that you can reach a lot more people by approaching them as a community, instead of an 'us versus them' type thing."

As protests surge across the country in response to the Trump administration's testing of the tenets of US democracy, these women have found in quilt making another avenue to express their outrage.

Quilt making has a long and storied history. It was used to advance women's voices on slavery abolition, civil rights, and the many people who lost their lives to AIDS. For these women, the issue is safeguarding democracy, with its separation of powers and checks and balances.

Democracy is also an issue Latter-day Saints can agree on. About 40 percent of Mormon Women for Ethical Government members are Republicans, 34 percent Democrats, and about 26 percent independents and unaffiliated, said co-executive director Emma Petty Addams.

The project's brainchild is Jessica Preece, a political scientist at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. Preece said she felt the need to do something to protest the dismantling of government agencies such as the US Agency for International Development without instruction from Congress. She considered planning a demonstration but wondered how effective that would be.

"There was no way 55 people in Provo were going to make the

RNS PHOTO / YONAT SHIMRON

Alisyn Rogerson (right) designs a quilt square in Durham, North Carolina, on April 25.

OBITUARY

## David Tracy

Influential Catholic theologian David Tracy died April 29. He was 86.

An ordained priest, Tracy began his academic career in 1967 at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. After being dismissed for openly opposing the Catholic Church's contraception ban and rejection of marriage equality, Tracy joined the faculty at the University of Chicago Divinity school in 1969, where he would teach theology and hermeneutics until his retirement in 2007.

Tracy wrote nine books, including *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, and is credited with being one of the first Catholic theologians to engage deeply with Jewish, Buddhist, Protestant, and secular thought. In 1982, Tracy was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

In a 2002 interview with the CENTURY, Tracy described his evolution from viewing panentheism as the best way to describe the reality of God to preferring the idea of the impossible instead.

"It used to be embarrassing to speak of the impossible," he said. "But it is a deeply meaningful category."

In an April 30 Facebook post, Kenneth L. Woodward, former religion editor at *Newsweek*, lauded Tracy's legacy.

"That he was the greatest foundational theologian of his era . . . is I would argue beyond question." □

—Dawn Araujo-Hawkins

news cycle," Preece said. "It wasn't gonna matter. And so I thought, well, I'm not sure this is the best use of anybody's time."

Preece then remembered her mother, who took up quilting late in life after finding an unfinished quilt that her grandmother had started. Preece also knew that quilt making has served women throughout the years, both as a homemaking skill and as a way of expressing their ideas in times when other avenues were not available to them.

In the 19th century, abolitionist Lydia Maria Child stitched a crib quilt honoring enslaved mothers whose children were torn from them. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union created the Drunkard's Path quilt pattern to promote abstinence from alcohol. During World War I, women raised money by quilting a popular Red Cross pattern. And during the 1960s, poor Black women in Gee's Bend, Alabama, started the Freedom Quilting Bee.

Preece ran the idea by Mormon Women for Ethical Government, of which she is a member, in February. Within 48 hours, the group got 120 women and children to the courthouse plaza in Provo. They set out tables, chairs, sewing machines, and Sharpie pens. Preece cut out the squares. In no time, they had enough squares for two quilts—one for each of Utah's senators.


Jessica Preece with a quilt created in Provo, Utah

TRACY: COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO DIVINITY SCHOOL | QUILT: COURTESY OF JESSICA PREECE

Quilt squares are hung to dry during a quilting event in Durham, North Carolina, on April 25.

"There was conversation, there was connection, and then it was just exciting to kind of watch everyone's words be sewn together into a beautiful quilt," said Petty Addams, who attended the event.

Soon after, the group launched its campaign: Quilting for the Constitution: Peace by Piece. Several civil society groups signed on as partners.

Since then, the group has held 52 quilting events across the country in libraries, public meeting spaces, and people's homes. On May 6, they gathered near the US Capitol to hand tie and bind the quilts together before delivering them to elected representatives.

Mychael-Ann Pelo, who works for the Mormon women's group in North Carolina, said the project appealed to her because of its communal nature.

"There's a lot of power in doing things together in community," Pelo said. "I think that's what this moment calls for, so it spoke to me."

Pelo put out the word to her congregation, book club, and neighbors, and 13 women showed up to quilt at her home. As they completed each piece, they hung them on a clothesline she attached to a cabinet wall. She later sewed them into a quilt with the North Carolina flag in the center.

At least two of the women in attendance were Jewish neighbors.

"Someday I'm gonna have to answer to my children and grandchildren: Why did bubbe not do anything while the country crumbled?" said Suzanne Minton, using the Yiddish word *bubbe* for grandmother. "I feel a responsibility to speak out."

As they worked, they talked about Trump administration cuts to cancer research and women's health studies. One woman shared that her husband was laid off from his job with the USAID.

Another talked about how North Carolina lawmakers were trying to create an office similar to the Department of Government Efficiency in Washington.

Alisyn Rogerson of Durham quietly took a red Sharpie and crafted her own statement on a piece of cloth: "Dignity in every instance for every person." The music teacher and violinist said she reads Heather Cox Richardson's popular Substack Letters from an American every morning and, alongside her husband, has attended a lot of rallies.

"I just have to do something," she said. "I'm so angry." □


A quilt made of squares inspired by the First Article of the Constitution, made in Durham, North Carolina

TOP: RNS PHOTO / YONAT SHIMRON | BOTTOM: MYCHAEL-ANN PELO

# July 6
# 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

*2 Kings 5:1–14*

IT COULD BE ON THE FRONT PAGE of a tabloid: "Prestigious Army Commander Healed by Bizarre Ritual from Prophet." Naaman's story is a dramatic tale with surprising twists. But even though the storyline is compelling, it's the peripheral characters that capture my attention for deeper reflection. The young Israelite girl who serves in Naaman's house, his personal servants who accompany him to visit Elisha—these are the unassuming voices that propel him toward healing. They are not the heroes of the story, but their actions are noteworthy because without them Naaman would continue to suffer from his disease. It's faith affirming to pause and remember the people in our own life stories whose influence altered our choices and turned us toward a new wholeness. God's saving work is never too big for ordinary moments or casual conversations.

Naaman's first turn toward healing isn't the result of a direct request. Desperation and pain prompt people to take chances, and Naaman is suffering. So he leans into an unlikely source of help, following the one-off lead of his wife's servant girl. This young Israelite surely has her own traumatic story of being removed from her home and forced to serve her captors. Is she a naturally compassionate person, genuinely concerned about his suffering from chronic pain? Or is she merely thinking out loud, wistfully remembering her home, where she knew love, comfort, and wholeness? Whatever the reasons, her innocent musings begin a cascade of conversations and action.

It's easy to dismiss the value of a younger person's perspective because they seem too inexperienced, too naive, or too literal. But Jesus is clear when he commends the value of a childlike faith: "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (Luke 18:17). Children are not a peripheral oddity to Jesus but an essential doorway toward God's intentions. When we seriously consider ideas from members of a younger generation, we can glean unexpected insights. Are we open to unlikely sources for new hope? What voices are we willing to listen to?

Naaman's personal travel attendants help guide him toward healing too. They probably have also witnessed the depth of his suffering, maybe even suffered a bit themselves because of it. Chronic pain can make life miserable for the afflicted and those close to them alike. So Naaman's healing and relief could mean an easier existence for them. They are accustomed to taking his orders and being subservient to him. So they listen to his complaint that Elisha's instructions are too simplistic and meaningless, and they watch him angrily reject the possibility of healing. In a bold and perhaps risky response, they question him. They prod him to reconsider following Elisha's instructions. They take the leap of faith and imagine healing for him. Whether it comes from his wisdom as a leader or his desperation as a person in pain, Naaman's willingness to listen to others points him toward wholeness.

In our current political milieu, many feel powerless against the larger-than-life rulers who make and break the patterns of life. We need the reminder that ordinary, relatively powerless people are very often the links to life-giving change for our spiritual lives. As followers of Jesus we can imagine the healing and wholeness our hurting world needs. Will we be vulnerable enough to voice our dreams? Can we be bold enough to redirect others toward wholeness? With the compassion of real love for others, we could rouse ourselves from despair and regain our footing as people of hope. We could be dreamers of God's great plan of wholeness, joining with God's Spirit to expect it, move toward it, and create it.

Steven Charleston writes in *Ladder to the Light* about a vision he had:

> I saw an older man standing alone by the side of the road. He kept looking down that road as if he was expecting a bus, but no bus stopped there. When I mentioned that to him, he said he was not waiting for a bus. He was waiting for a parade. He had heard that if you wait long enough, the parade would come back down your street. He had missed it before and he did not want to miss it again. I looked at him. He was different from me. Different color. Different religion. He looked a little grubby and he had an accent, but I decided it didn't matter. He was a person. I was a person. He needed a parade. I needed a parade. He had hope. I had hope. So I waited beside him, looking down the street in the same direction. And the minute I did, we both heard music in the distance.

**GINA BURKHART** *is associate pastor of Landisville Mennonite Church in Landisville, Pennsylvania.*

# July 13
# 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

*Luke 10:25–37*

**Jesus understands the power** of imagination and the way that a simple image can lead us into new worlds of understanding and action. His parables put abstract faith into tangible reels that linger in our minds. Rather than crafting a complex theological response to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus tells a timeless story, with characters that are believable even centuries later. If we veer too far from the basic impact of the parable with heavy doctrinal discussions, we risk losing its power as a real example we can emulate.

In *Texts Under Negotiation*, Walter Brueggemann posits that people do not change much because of doctrinal argument or sheer cognitive or moral appeal. "People in fact change by the offer of new models, images, and pictures of how the pieces of life fit together," he says. "Transformation is the slow, steady process of inviting each other into a counterstory about God, world, neighbor, and self. This slow, steady process has as counterpoint the subversive process of unlearning and disengaging from a story we find no longer to be credible or adequate." The parable of the good Samaritan helps us imagine God's counterstory with relatable people and actions. When we can translate those kinds of actions into our own lives, the Good News comes to life—and our community becomes richer because of its diversity and shared care.

*The question "Who is my neighbor?" has always been countercultural.*

Who is my neighbor? This is a relevant question for the contemporary church. If Christians could answer it with one definitive response, then the church could finally hold itself accountable and act in solidarity with those who are hurting and need care. But centuries after this question was posed to Jesus, we still muddle his response about loving God and neighbor. We continue to stir up excuses for our hesitation and limitations in offering mercy or compassion. Jesus doesn't identify why the priest and the Levite don't offer care, so we fill in with our own possible excuses: a lack of expertise in triage care, a concern that giving time to one need would steal time from another. Or maybe it's sheer callousness or simple fear. The excuses are insignificant as Jesus turns the focus on the positive action that demonstrates a neighborly love.

The law expert who asks, "Who is my neighbor?" reveals a self-focused motive. His primary concern is his own salvation: What must he do to inherit eternal life? He wants affirmation that his knowledge is going to give him an eternal reward. He wants an easy template to place over his life to prove that he is following the law of God. That temptation lingers in our own propensity to look for binary answers to faith's hardest questions.

For decades Fred Rogers began each episode of his children's program with the original song "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" The words hint at the show's themes of compassion and kindness: "I have always wanted to have a neighbor just like you. . . . / Would you be mine? Could you be mine? / Won't you be my neighbor?"

Mr. Rogers's lyrics turn the self-protecting question of "Who is my neighbor?" into a self-expanding invitation. It's a shift in perspective, expecting that our lives and our community will be even more beautiful as they become filled with new neighbors. It was a countercultural idea then and continues to exist in contrast with a secular narrative that describes outsiders as a dangerous intrusion into our comfortable neighborhoods. Jesus invites us to embrace this sort of boundaryless approach, full of anticipation rather than dread. When there are tangible ways to serve others and to share mercy and kindness, taking them up is not our obligation but our delight. When we recall how Jesus related to others, it confirms the wisdom that there are two kinds of people: those we love and those we haven't yet met.

At a vacation hotel I was amused when the locker room attached to the swanky golf clubhouse had an unusual designation: the "transformation room." But I can't argue with its premise. Indeed, most people exit the space with some degree of physical change. I wonder if we can approach this familiar parable with creativity and a new expectation that it will not be merely a cognitive exercise but a truly transformational engagement, one that helps us to be more like Jesus. Can we imagine how our lives will be different—and the Good News more tangibly expressed—if we stop trying to identify the boundaries of our neighborhood and focus instead on how we can bravely ask others around us who are in need to be our neighbors? —*GB*

# July 20
# 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

*Amos 8:1–12; Psalm 52*

THE PROPHET AMOS, an arborist and shepherd, speaks as a lightning rod to those who "trample on the needy" while calling themselves faithful to God. Speaking on God's behalf, Amos declares that wrath awaits those who are negligent in their care for others. It's a startling consequence for a nation of "rampant narcissism," as Joan Chittister characterizes the United States in her book *The Time Is Now*.

This passage from Amos has a picturesque beginning. God places before Amos a basket of summer fruit—fruit that has warmed in the summer months and is now ripe. God asks Amos what he sees, and Amos replies, "A basket of ripe fruit." Warm, fuzzy peaches and plump pears bursting with flavor, ready to exercise their purpose: to provide vitamins and other nutrients to energize people for living. If the fruit does not fulfill its purpose, it will soften, brown, bruise, and rot into the earth.

As it is with God's peaches and pears, so it is with God's people. The time is ripe, warns the prophet; the time is now. God's rage will not be held at bay. Do something with the energy I have given you. Give yourself to the hungers and needs around you, like a ripe, sweet, juicy peach is consumed at breakfast.

For all God has provided, the people are not living out their responsibility as human beings. They "bring to ruin the poor of the land" and show no concern for those who suffer. Through the prophet Amos, God interferes. God judges; God condemns. The people "practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals." God's wrath will descend in the form of a famine unlike any other: "not a famine of bread or a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD."

This February, *The New York Times* reported on the results of a comprehensive national study of the factors shaping America today, across the political spectrum. The report was compiled by 13 different scholars, all advisers to the past five presidents. According to the *Times*, the report concludes that the US economy "is performing better than any of its peers. . . . and remains far richer, per person, than China or India. The report also finds that the U.S. fares less well in almost every other realm, including health, happiness and social trust."

A famine for the words of the Lord has struck our wealthy nation, as it did in the time of Amos. God's anger is unleashed not only on behalf of those who suffer and are in need, not only because the people have been given more than enough and still do not share what they have but for a third reason: self-indulgent lives are unhappy and purposeless.

Writing in the eighth century BC, Amos addresses a central question of modernity: Why have health and happiness become unmoored from economic prosperity? Happiness is not found in building more to store more. Finding meaning, purpose, and happiness have to do with how we give from what we are given—both for the benefit of those in need and for the purposefulness that results from concern for others.

Jesus' life was shaped by the prophets and psalmists who were comfortable with their anger, believers who saw resistance and protest as part of their job description. When something goes against the scriptural record of God's intentions for people, they speak out.

Jesus grew up listening to the psalms. The psalmist's accusation of neglect of the needy is not followed by "may God forgive you" or "try harder next time." "God will break you down forever," says Psalm 52. "He will snatch and tear you from your tent; he will uproot you from the land of the living." What has happened to our angry voice?

Evangelical Christians, especially conservative politicians, have no hesitation in expressing anger or judgment over DEI, climate change, Social Security, public education, immigration, gender identity, anything that threatens their perception of what is right—they speak, spend money, organize, act, and vote.

As Chittister told Oprah Winfrey in an interview, a prophet is someone who refuses whatever does not align with God's love: the unjust treatment of women, the abuse of nature, racial injustice, the neglect of those in need. She suggested that our anger might be God's grace working in us: it can fuel our willingness to participate in important moral conversations. Chittister recommends that we simply say to each other, on any side of any argument, "I think differently than that"—and then engage.

The prophet Amos would agree: anger is grace and fuel.

**CATHY H. GEORGE** *is a prison chaplain, pastor, and author of* The Stillness We Seek.

# July 27
# 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

*Luke 11:1–13*

Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is shorter than Matthew's. And only in Luke does Jesus offer the prayer in response to a request from one of the disciples: "Lord, teach us to pray." After instructing them in prayer, he tells the parable of the persistent friend, demonstrating the two-way nature of prayer and elevating the role of persistence.

As the reading begins, Jesus is off by himself, praying. This is important to notice, as it tells us that he is not only instructing but also practicing what he teaches others to do. Jesus' pattern of stepping away to be alone and pray is present in all four gospels. He goes off to the mountain, sits by the sea, sneaks off through the middle of a crowd to be alone.

I would guess that he leaves the crowd to escape the pressure of people on every side as the growing crowds follow and find him. He seeks quiet perhaps to hear himself think, to process what is happening around him, to pray for others. He seeks to be fed by the beauty of the mountains, the peace he feels in a boat on a glassy lake, the tranquility of waves on the shore of the sea. And I imagine he goes off to connect to the source of his strength and grace by listening to God.

*Jesus addresses a God who is beyond the human horizon and yet part of the household.*

When Jesus returns and the disciple makes his request, Jesus responds by laying out the essentials of how to talk to God, beginning with a name for God: "Father." This language is familiar to us, and it provokes a variety of reactions. But if we set those reactions aside for a moment, we can take in how startling it might have been for Jesus to call God *Father*. In Greek the word is *Abba*, and the closest English translation is *Daddy*: a familiar, intimate name for one's father. It's a playful, loving name, a household name, a bounce-me-on-your knee and pick-me-up-at-school name. "Daddy" is the name of someone to whom you might tell your worries, your secrets, and your joys.

It's not "Lord of the heavens." It's not "Governor of the city" or "Sovereign with dominion over all" or even "Creator of the universe." *Daddy* is not just a different kind of name for God; it's a different conception of who God might be in people's lives. The word opens the door to an intimacy Jesus shares with God, the closeness of a father to son.

The God being addressed is beyond the human horizon and yet part of one's household. To make this point, the address to God as "Father" is followed by "hallowed be your name." Jesus does not want to be misunderstood. Though he is calling God *Abba* and resisting established barriers between human and divine, in naming the hallowedness of God he also insists that this intimacy is not a cozy familiarity that diminishes respect.

The Lord's Prayer also instructs the disciples to make a series of requests when they pray. "Your kingdom come" is a prayer of submission, asking that God's ways be manifest in the human condition. "Give us each day our daily bread" is a request that arises from the body, while "forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us" is one that arises from the soul.

When the Lord's Prayer ends, the consultation Jesus is offering is not over. Luke's Jesus offers this terse lesson in prayer and then proceeds to demonstrate an essential ingredient in prayer by telling the parable of the persistent friend. What is our part in prayer? Shameless persistence. The parable Jesus tells, of the impatient neighbor who does not wait until morning but repeatedly bangs on his neighbor's door at night to wake him, is an invitation. The story encourages us to ask and ask, not to hide our needs but to pursue them in prayer, to actively engage in prayer not as a bystander but as a player. If you went to God unashamed to ask for whatever you want and need, what would you ask for?

God does not intend for us to be passive bystanders. Asking and seeking and knocking are all active verbs, verbs that draw us out that engage us. They invite us to answer a question God asks: *What can I do for you?* —*CHG*

# Voices

"Once I learned about the concept of *han*, I saw it everywhere."

—Peter Choi, *page 30*

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**Alejandra Oliva** cooks through a crisis

**Isaac Villegas** shows up with a meal

**Samuel Wells** is rattled by a parishioner's story

**THE CENTURY COLUMNISTS** PORTRAITS BY AGATA NOWICKA

Brian Bantum • Peter Choi • Phil Christman • Julian DeShazier
Kelly Brown Douglas • Melissa Florer-Bixler • Rachel Mann • Alejandra Oliva
Stephanie Perdew • Debie Thomas • Isaac S. Villegas • Samuel Wells

# A farewell to snow

Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God* reminds me how much we have to mourn as we enter a climate dystopia.

by Stephanie Perdew

*Stephanie Perdew (Cherokee Nation) is director of the Damascus Project, the theological education ministry of the Wisconsin and Minnesota Conferences of the United Church of Christ, and affiliate professor of Christian history at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary.*

Last summer I led a book club discussion on Louise Erdrich's dystopian novel *Future Home of the Living God*. The online gathering was organized by a nonprofit that focuses on spirituality for a climate-changed world. I was glad to talk about one of my favorite novelists.

Erdrich, who is enrolled in the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, is a prolific writer whose stories of Natives on and off reservation are haunting and humorous and often break my heart. I hadn't read *Future Home of the Living God* before. It's a bit different from many of her novels: set in Minneapolis in the not too distant future, it tells the story of a young woman who was adopted out of a tribe farther north in Minnesota and is now pregnant. In this dystopian future, humans have stopped evolving or have begun devolving in ways not quite named. Pregnant women are being detained by the authorities and imprisoned in birthing centers. The implication—again, not narrated graphically—is that women bearing devolved fetuses will be terminated along with their children, while women bearing healthy fetuses will be forced to bear more in order to ensure the continued survival of the fittest.

Apparently Erdrich started the novel and then shelved it for a decade. She picked it up again and finished it in 2017, when its plot was starting to sound less fantastic and more plausible. The book explores themes of political disintegration and human devolution. As the young woman's pregnancy unfolds, she tries to evade the authorities while also reconnecting with her birth mother and Ojibwe family on the reservation.

A line early in the novel has stuck with me. The main character comments that it is sweltering in Minneapolis in the summer—and that in recent years the snow has stopped completely. From this passing remark and a few others, readers are to understand that the political and biological unraveling is being propelled by climate change.

Reading this last summer, it took no feat of imagination for me to think that a time is coming when Minnesota would be without snowfall. It had already started. I am in Minnesota regularly for work. My husband grew up in Minnesota, and his family is still there, as are many of our dear friends. We'd heard from them that past winter that week after week, month after month, there was little to no snow. First it was surprising. Then it was concerning and unnerving. The lack of snow would mean a dry spring and summer and would disrupt natural cycles for animals and plants, gardeners and farmers.

What the novel narrated in fiction was becoming real. The thought of it brought me to tears while reading it. I knew I loved snow, but I had no idea how much, or how unsettled and grieved I'd feel imagining a time when the snow would stop.

When I moved to Minnesota for college, I'd never seen so much snow. I'd been raised on the plains of Nebraska, where the snow blew across the prairie, regularly shutting down the interstate. But in Nebraska it would snow and blow, it would melt, the cold wind would whip over the barren fields, and then it would snow some more. The snowpack in Minnesota often began in October and did not finish melting until April. My senior year of college I became one of many who can remember where they were the afternoon the famed Halloween blizzard blew in, depositing feet of snow on campus overnight and then continuing for two more days, accumulating the most snow in one storm system in Minnesota's history to that date.

As the snow persisted through the winter, never completely melting, the sunny days came, cold and dry, deceptive in their brightness as the sun glared off the snow. When I later moved to Chicago, I could not bear the gray, damp winters with little snow and less sun. I would still prefer –20 degrees with the sun shining off ample snow to foggy rain and slush. What I love most

of all about snow is its stillness, the hush of the world after a steady snowfall, going out to walk in that stillness as the snow clings to the trunks of trees and their branches, glistening and swaying softly.

But I know that in Minnesota, and across the north, that ample snow has been diminishing. The winter before I read Erdrich's novel, official weather reports confirmed what we'd heard from family and friends: Minnesota received less snow that winter than ever in its recorded history. The summer that ensued was sweltering, just like the summer before it and just like in the novel, and after the snowless winter, a drought ensued. Much of Minnesota remains in a moderate drought after another winter with slightly more precipitation but still meager snow. And although the earth has always had its cycles of precipitation and drought, the acceleration of the warming cycle is human-made—and likely too far gone for the problem to be human-solved.

I carry with me feelings of grief, despair, and anger at the knowledge that a few years ago we may have crossed the point of no return in the acceleration of climate change outcomes. What I grieve most is the diminishing of snow. As the climate warms, precipitation in the north will increasingly come in the form of rain, when it comes at all. Like in Erdrich's novel, the day will come when the snow stops falling, and we will have only our memories of those hushed mornings and quiet walks, those sunny days of sun gleaming off the snowpack. I will remember them with longing and regret when they pass away, which will likely be in my lifetime.

This summer, I'm praying for miracles. The one I pray for the most is for the return of the snow. ❑

# My new understanding of mountaintop faith

Together, the Psalms and the Korean concept of *han* have changed my perspective on the emotional Christianity of my childhood.

by Peter Choi

*Peter Choi is executive director of the Center for Faith and Justice in San Francisco and author of* George Whitefield: Evangelist for God and Empire.

In the Korean American immigrant church of my childhood, the mountaintop was everything. Winter and summer retreats, sites of concentrated revival spirituality, represented high seasons in the church calendar, up there with Christmas and Easter. The longing for revival fueled our life together. On the mountaintop, we felt that anything was possible. Back on level ground, to stem the inevitable tide of backsliding, there were additional revival services between retreats. The truly devout frequented *gidowons* (literally, "prayer mountains"), a kind of retreat center where it was not unusual to hear shouts of prayer around the clock. Slipping into ordinary time was unavoidable, but not to worry: extraordinary seasons were not far off. One only needed to be diligent in prayer and watchfulness.

As I grew up, I drifted from what I perceived to be the unhealthy roller coaster of emotional Christianity. In college, I picked up Charles Finney's *Lectures on Revival* at a used bookstore to better understand and, let's be honest, to critique the methods of the Second Great Awakening. After seminary, I went to graduate school to study the aftermath of the Great Awakening, convinced that there would be much damage and dysfunction to dissect.

What I didn't grasp about the mountaintop spirituality of my parents was their intimate familiarity with the valleys and plains of life. A paradigm-shifting lesson for me later in life came with discovering *han* as a lens for understanding Korean culture. According to Minjung theologian Suh Nam-dong, han is the "feeling of unresolved resentment against injustices suffered, a sense of

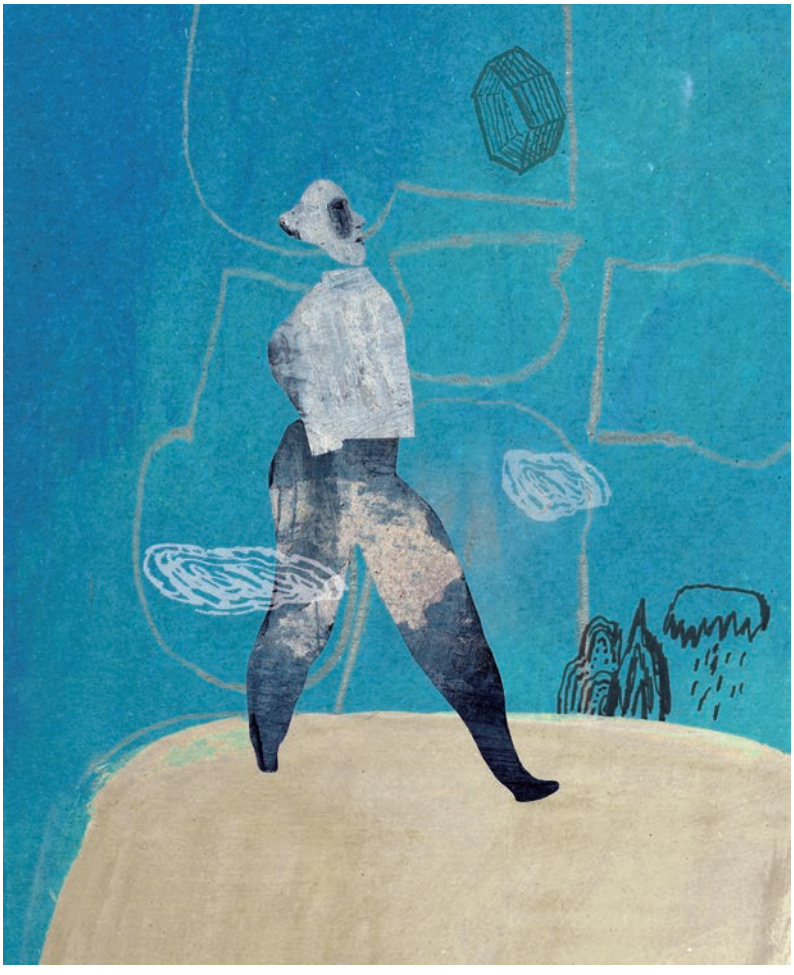
helplessness because of the overwhelming odds against one, a feeling of acute pain in one's guts and bowels, making the whole body writhe and squirm, and an obstinate urge to take revenge and to right the wrong—all these combined." Put another way, han is the agglomeration of a long history of invasion and conquest, like angst but miles deeper because of its resistance to structural oppression.

Once I learned about han, I saw it everywhere. Its pervasiveness helped me understand how experiences of lament and rage fired the longing for spiritual renewal. At the heart of Korean Christianity's intense preoccupation with spiritual kindling, I realized, was not merely an inordinate passion for revival, but a pathos rooted in the struggle for survival.

This change in perspective also helped me realize that not all mountaintops are the same. Consider Psalm 1, which represents one kind of spiritual peak. The Psalter opens with a bang, but by projecting a binary view of the world: the righteous will prosper, and the wicked will perish. It is the confidence of untested faith, almost immediately shaken as we move through the early songs: "O Lord, how many are my foes!" (3:1). Contrary to Psalm 1, life for the faithful is unexpectedly forlorn: "I am weary with my moaning" (6:6). Expressions of doubt, pining, and anguish are found throughout this songbook: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?" (13:1).

Even at the midpoint of the Psalter, there is little relief: "For I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (Psalm 73:3). It's jarring to realize the opening verses of Psalm 73 offer a direct challenge to the theology of Psalm 1. The wicked—far from perishing—are prospering, and the reason for confidence in Psalm 1 has become a source of crisis in Psalm 73. The psalmist can't help but cry out, protesting the injustice of it all.

Together, han and the Psalms taught me to appreciate a spirituality that is equally familiar with peaks and valleys. They helped me see the revival spirituality of my youth as deeply grounded in sadness, lament, even rage at the state of the world—themes that are amply represented throughout the Hebrew songbook of faith. Talk of drenching my bed with tears and raining coals of fire and sulfur on one's enemies may upend our expectations for a songbook of faith and hope. They also express the lived experiences of ordinary people and provide glimpses into the anguish of han. They reflect the rugged, weather-beaten spirituality of Psalm 73 more than the wide-eyed innocence of Psalm 1.



*At the heart of Korean Christianity's preoccupation with spiritual kindling is a pathos rooted in the struggle for survival.*

To be sure, Psalm 1 is part and parcel of the journey of faith, whether as a starting point or a way station. But there is also a dynamic movement across the whole of the Psalter. As Walter Brueggemann has written, the Psalms move from duty to delight, from obedience to praise.

Longing for revival doesn't have to involve navel-gazing or self-indulgence. In a world where so much is wrong, where the wicked prosper, I now find it hard to imagine complaining about songs and prayers for mountaintops. A spirituality of the Psalms refracted through han helps me imagine a faith that decries the unjust and pleads for justice in all of life: mountaintops, valleys, and plains. ❑

*Illustration by Jorge González*

# Learning humility as a student pastor

Field education invites us to the lifelong work of discovering the Holy Spirit through our stunning inadequacies.

by Melissa Florer-Bixler

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

The congregation stood in a circle, their eyes turned toward me as I spoke the words of institution: "For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread." I raised the round loaf. Tearing it down the center, I continued. "This is my body, which is broken for you."

At that moment, a clove of garlic fell from the torn bread and landed at my feet.

That summer I was a field education student at a small Mennonite church in north Philadelphia, completing an internship required for the master of divinity degree. During those months, I preached, supported the church's community development organization, planned youth group events, and visited church members in their homes.

On that humid July morning, I was tasked with presiding over communion, and it was the job of the presider to procure the elements before the service. On my way to worship, I'd stopped at the local Whole Foods where, in a hurry, I'd grabbed a round boule in a plastic bag and a bottle of grape juice from the shelf. I hadn't noticed the label: "enriched white bread, whole garlic cloves."

Over the summer, hundreds of churches across the country welcome student pastors to learn and grow among them. The churches that host student pastors offer more than a laboratory to try out what seminarians learn in the classroom. They offer future pastors a space to discover their identity and explore their limitations. Field education placements invite pastors to the lifelong work of discovering the Holy Spirit through our stunning inadequacies.

*In a hurry, I grabbed a round boule. I didn't notice the label.*

Student pastors have many occasions to discover their humility. Field education is often a summer of firsts. The first time facing down a group of kids during a children's sermon. The first time not knowing what to say to a grieving parent. The first time getting on the wrong side of the finance committee chair. We discover, as Richard Neuhaus once wrote, that "the minister is expected to be preacher, leader of worship, counselor, teacher, scholar, helper of the needy, social critic, administrator, revivalist, fund-raiser, and a host of other sometimes impossible things." We come achingly close to our humanness, to our vulnerability before the task of ministry.

Field education isn't designed for humiliation. But at their best, the encounters with "impossible things" that it offers can return us to dependency on God and on the church that holds us. Another time during my summer placement, I was asked to visit a baby and his family at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. The one-year-old admitted to the hospital the previous day had been born with life-threatening and persistent allergic reactions, the extent of which was still unknown.

At the time I was especially attuned to the vulnerability of children. I was pregnant with my second child, and a recent ultrasound had revealed a cyst inside the fetus's choroid plexus. Our midwife explained that the cyst would most likely resolve on its own, but there was a chance its presence indicated trisomy 18, a life-ending chromosomal difference. That summer and my field education were marked by tense waiting and worry.

At CHOP I parked my car, showed my ID, received my visitor's pass, and made my way through the maze of the hospital. I passed through corridors lined with massive photographs of children treated there: a toddler bald from cancer treatments, an infant smiling through a nasal cannula, a family surrounding a teenager with Down syndrome. While the pictures were designed to invoke hope and resilience, I saw echoes of my own child's potential diagnosis. By the time I reached the room, surging with pregnancy hormones and empathy, I was in tears.

*What am I doing here?* I wondered. I had no business offering comfort or counsel to the people inside the room. I gathered myself before pushing open the door and stepping inside.

The mother of the baby sat in a chair texting while her son played on a blanket. He smiled up

at me as I walked in the door. As I sat down the boy's mother caught my eye. "Are you okay?" She placed her hand on my shoulder as I explained how vulnerable this place made me feel and how I felt like I was letting her down as a pastoral presence.

She smiled and gently reminded me that CHOP was a regular part of their lives. She was surprised to see me—"We're here all the time."

Any illusions I harbored as to my role in caring for this family evaporated. They didn't expect an answer that unraveled the riddle of human suffering. My image of the pastor—comforting a distraught mother, stepping outside herself as a pillar of strength—disappeared. I was one link in a chain of care that began the moment this baby was born, when church members brought meals, when they rushed to babysit the first time the family called 911, when emergency turned to routine.

It's been many years since I walked pregnant and crying through the halls of CHOP. I've cultivated the boundaries required for pastors to emotionally and spiritually withstand the devastations of pastoral care. I've learned how to walk toward disaster, toward conflict, toward crisis. I've preached good sermons and mediocre sermons, knowing that a hundred more opportunities to preach lie before me. While sometimes I have known just what to say, I have also discovered that, at times, having no words is what the Spirit offers.

And I remember my first church as a pastor, my first communion, how when the bread was broken and the smell of garlic saturated the air, no one in the circle of the congregation flinched. I remember how each person took the torn loaf in their hands, cloves and all, and passed it from hand to hand repeating the ancient words: "The body of Christ, broken for you." ❑

# Cooking when the world is on fire

These days, daily tasks can feel like a distraction.

by Alejandra Oliva

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

I used to cook dinner at home every night. I have always been a fussy, multistep-recipe, sporadic sort of home cook. There is little I like better than leaning over a stockpot or peering into a dim oven to try to divine the mysteries of whatever is going on in there. The pandemic took this inclination and made it a daily habit. What else was there to do?

Cooking was a way to make the time pass, to put myself to work in a way I otherwise didn't really have the opportunity for. If you're reading in these lines the pandemic experience of a childless, email-class worker, you're right to—my experience of the pandemic was one of isolation and quiet, not of overwhelm and new responsibilities.

Cooking was a way to make things *happen*, to start the night with a pile of raw meat and vegetables and seasoning, purchased in a furtive biweekly masked-up trip to the grocery store, and finish it with a full belly and neatly packed Tupperware for the next day's lunch. I continued working from home for the next four years, and for the next four years it felt natural and good to shut my laptop and immediately start peeling and chopping. It made me—the more abstracted, messier, more lackadaisical partner—feel accomplished, like I was contributing something to the running of the household.

There's a Grace Paley poem, "The Poet's Occasional Alternative," that seems to sum this all up: "because of unreportable / sadnesses I decided to / settle this morning for a re- / sponsive eatership." Sometimes the emails and the writing drafts are both bad, and a big, comforting meal is the one thing you think you can do right, in the face of it all, the one big tick mark you can put in your to-do list.

And then, a few months ago, I started a job that took me into an office nearly every day. The

emails were still often bad, and the drafts of new writing somewhat fewer and farther between, but in addition I would get home an hour later than I was used to—with barely enough energy to throw some frozen dumplings in a pan, the sort of short cut I had avoided before.

At around the same time, you may remember, the news got significantly worse, every *New York Times* notification unleashing one more little bubble of anxiety to join the rest of them. Cooking became not only something that was harder, that felt like it took up more of my brain and effort and everything, but also something that mattered less in the grand scheme of things. What on earth was I doing cooking, tending to my stovetop, instead of working to put out the big fire raging in the world outside my kitchen?

So much of my life and work these days feel like a distraction. Why am I letting a presidential administration so plainly bent on distracting me accomplish its goals? On the other hand, how can I try to live a normal life when the slow slide into fascism is gaining speed every day? How can I take anything seriously that does not alleviate someone's suffering? But here I am, at 6 p.m. every day, staring disconsolately into my refrigerator, trapped by the recurrence of my own hunger, by the needs of my all-too-human body.

It will not surprise you to learn that it is books—the meditations and musings of other people who have gone before me—that are helping me resolve this unease. Kathleen Norris's *The Quotidian Mysteries* is about women's work, about the dailiness of things like laundry and making dinner. It is also a book about time and how it changes us, how the little things we do day by day transform us in the way we transform them, how the dailiness of maintenance work keeps us in good relationship with God and each other. Norris reminds me that the work we do for care is never wasted, that God is a God of small details and minutia, and that all this can be holy, too.

Rebecca May Johnson's *Small Fires* uses the tools of the literary critic to deconstruct and reconstruct the home cook's dog-eared recipe, charting the way that she is, herself, changed through the repetitions—she calls them "performances"—of a recipe for a red, splattering tomato sauce. Her book itself is an attempt at "researching the relationship between the body and language, between self and other," to take her own hunger and use it as a tool to understand the world around her. Cooking the tomato sauce teaches her how to meet the hunger of her friends and neighbors. It reminds her that her hands are always in relation to her ingredients, that her slightest intervention will have an effect on the finished meal and how it arrives on taste buds. Johnson teaches me that the work of the kitchen is the work of the world.

*Cooking reminds me that the smallest of my actions is performed in a web of mutuality and care.*

The work I do in front of the stove, the daily care I take with meals—this isn't just about sustenance, or leftovers, or being healthy. Even—especially—on the days when it feels tedious and exhausting, cooking a meal for my husband and me puts me in relationship to him and to the world. It is an expression of my morals and concerns, reminding me that the smallest of my actions is performed in a web of mutuality and care.

This realization doesn't necessarily give me more energy at the end of the day, when all I want to do is collapse into an evening-long doomscroll. But it does remind me that even these little daily things are all a part of making me ready for everything that is to come. ❑



*Illustration by Jorge González*

# Becoming manna

There's a connection between a desire to care and the offer of food. We're committed to each other's survival.

by Isaac S. Villegas

*Isaac S. Villegas is a Mennonite minister and author of* Migrant God.

I like food. I like Bible stories about food. The psalmist also likes stories about food. In the middle of the book, in Psalm 78, the author recounts the mighty work of God—a litany of glorious deeds and wonders, including the provision of food, of manna for the Israelites during their desert wanderings. The psalmist returns to the events narrated in Exodus 16 and Numbers 11—divine care for hungry people. That memory becomes a prayer of thanksgiving, a lyric in the song: "God commanded the skies above and opened the doors of heaven . . . and gave them the grain of heaven" (Ps. 78:23–24). God hears the people's complaints, their growling stomachs, and sends bread.

God sends manna because God cares for the human needs, because God's love matters for our lives. To talk about care is to get specific about the nature of God's love. God's care is what God's love looks like; care is what God's love feels like.

The provision of food is a demonstration of that care. This we know. Making food for someone is an act of care for their lives. When a friend is having a tough time, I want to bake cookies for them. And, to be honest, when I'm having a tough time I've been known to bake myself cookies. There's a connection between a desire to care and the offer of food—perhaps as a way of saying that we're committed to each other's survival, to each other's life. It's something we can do with our hands, a gesture of care that returns us to our fundamentals, to the basics: that we are creatures, that we rely on each other, that all of us are bundles of neediness.

Every meal is an acknowledgment of our dependence on a world beyond us, every breath a reminder that we are not self-sufficient, that we can't manage our lives without the support of a whole community—an environment—around us. The Covid-19 pandemic reminded us that human life is a collective breathing, our everyday communion in the air. To breathe is to partake in the gift of human living, a gift shared with us when the Spirit animated clumps of earth in Eden, breathing into our nostrils, making our bodies, gracing us with God's care and with God's life—a commitment to nurture, to nourish, to tend to the conditions of our existence, to inspire our world with life.

*Every meal is an acknowledgment of our dependence on a world beyond us.*

"I am the bread of life," Jesus tells his disciples in John's Gospel. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Jesus expands the story about God's provision of manna in the wilderness to include an offer of God's intangible care—life for the body and the soul. Because we are more than what we eat. We're needier than we'd like to admit, beyond our physical necessities—our reliance on relationships, on conversation, on play and work, on joy. To cry with a friend, to laugh. I think Dorothee Sölle, the German activist and theologian, had a good way to say all of this: *Death by Bread Alone*—that was the title of one of her books in the 1970s, during an earlier chapter of our loneliness epidemic. We need more than food to live. We need a life that includes others, a life that includes God's care for our bodily souls, our soulish bodies, our well-being: "the wish to be whole," Sölle writes, in the hope of our salvation.

God involves us in God's care for others. Worshiping God has everything to do with our devotion to each other. Our love for God is bound up with our love for one another. Church is all about how we get ourselves all mixed up in one another's lives, which can turn out to be annoying and exhausting because we're all a mess in our own ways. I know that I frustrate myself, so I'm sure that I frustrate other people. But the promise of congregational life is to become a home in the world for God's provision of grace. To experience ourselves with Christ, our salvation. To become whole.

The Christian life involves our need to show up for one another, to invite others into our lives, because we know that we don't have the best grasp on this world on our own. We

confuse ourselves when left to our own thoughts. We get lost when we wander in this world alone. To do the thing called church is to acknowledge our need for God's help, to turn to a friend for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to trust that Christ is present when we are present to each other—that God joins us when we pray together, when we fellowship, when we rely on a community to teach us what God's voice sounds like and what the gospel means for our world.

Our routines, our rhythms of gathering as the church, are corporate forms of prayer for manna: that we would become manna as we receive and give spiritual food, bread of life, Christ's life in ours. To become miracles of grace for each other in this wilderness of our political situation. To organize our churches as networks of care, in which we offer friends and strangers enough to sustain life for today, for this week, for this month, for these troubling years. To inspire us to love our neighbors, to struggle together for Christ's reign of peace, of justice.

To become heavenly bread, manna in the wilderness. ❑

*Samuel Wells is vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London and author of* Humbler Faith, Bigger God.

# A man I know had a near-death experience

What was *I* doing in his vision?

by Samuel Wells

Some time ago a man I know well died. I had gotten to know him over several years: his upbringing in a faraway land, his career in a caring profession, his courage and dignity in being prepared to walk with people whom the world despised and shunned, his faith and integrity, and later his struggle with life-threatening illness and the choices he had to make about the risks and possibilities of drastic treatment.

I know he died because he told me. He died on the operating table and remained dead for about 45 minutes. But somehow the physicians managed to bring him around and complete the ambitious procedure in such a way that, after some days, he was able to leave the hospital. A couple of weeks later I asked, "How've you been?" He replied, "I died a fortnight ago."

But what he said next startled me far more. "I want to tell you what I saw when I died," he said. "I saw Jesus clothed in white, with outstretched hands, and I saw myself being carried toward him by four people. My late father, late mother, and late brother were all holding me, the way we carry the body of Jesus out of the church in the Passion play on Palm Sunday. And there was a fourth person. The fourth person was you."

I jumped out of my skin. We were surrounded by people, by the hubbub of church coffee hour. A couple was waiting to talk about a wedding, an asylum seeker wanted me to sign forms for her application to remain in the UK, and some visitors from North Carolina hoped to exchange stories about my Duke days. I spotted someone who'd just lost her sister and wanted to see how she was doing.

But this was from another planet. I tried to screen out the noise and buzz of our company and to take in what he was telling me. This is a man who communicates not by loud voice or

expansive gesture but by understatement and the twinkle of an eye. He wasn't telling me about a dream. He said that he'd been dead, that wherever he'd gone to wasn't a reconstruction of unresolved memories and unfulfilled desires. It was whatever lies beyond us, or at least beyond him.

I rapidly assembled what I knew. He testified he'd seen three family members. OK—that's not a wild proposal; a lot of clergy try to persuade folk there's more to heaven than a family reunion, but encountering loved ones who have died is about as basic to expectations of life beyond death as you can get. Nothing out of the box there.

But what was *I* doing there?

I guess some clergy like the idea of leading their flock into the hereafter. I recalled stories of priests who were buried with their coffins turned the opposite direction from the others, so that on judgment day they could lead their people to glory. Not hitherto my model of ministry, but I'm flexible. More significantly, how could I be still alive and yet be with this godly man in heaven? I thought of Colossians: "For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (3:3). I quizzed the man for more details—Was anyone else around? Was God there? How long did all this go on?—but he was delphic in his inscrutability. He'd told me all there was to tell.

*Why is my reflex to push this away? A pastor's job is to be with people as they contemplate the deepest issues of their lives.*

Since discovering I'm already in heaven, I've pondered our conversation deeply. I've thought about near-death experiences and explored all the explanations about chemicals in the brain. I've considered the usual accounts of seeing oneself on the operating table from an upper corner of the room.

But why do I have the reflex to push this away, to find a quasi-scientific narrative? I'm a pastor. My job is to be with people as they contemplate the deepest issues of their lives, to refuse to run away when they're going nearer the bottom of the pond than I can deal with. Diverting to explanations is running away.

Since that encounter, I've thought about how in congregational ministry it can be pretty simple to plan weddings, sign forms for migrants, welcome visitors, even remember and express care for those bereaved. But with a head and heart full of such things, one can miss—or at least not have the emotional capacity for—the real business of God. What I want in a pastor is someone who's always ready for this kind of conversation—about what's going on in heaven right now—and isn't so preoccupied with the bustle of leading a community that they don't realize they've stumbled into forever.

I've also considered the chattering classes: how so much of the world is given over to comment and horror and gasps of approval or blame as instant judgments are made on provocative images that elicit strong reactions and heighten the temperature yet truly edify no one. How the church is absorbed in such a culture and mimics the rapid reactions and quarrels over things the news cycle will tomorrow leave behind. And I've wondered if I spend enough time on the things that really matter, with the people in whom the Spirit is doing extraordinary things.

But most of all I've recognized how today God sends prophets who have more variety in their ministry than simply denouncing the powers, who actually speak tenderly in ordinary conversations about remarkable things. I once read about someone who said he knew a person who was caught up—whether in the body or out of the body he didn't know—into paradise and heard things that are not to be told. Actually I know him, too. He told me about it the other day. ❑

*Illustration by Jorge González*

# Features

"A tree falling in a forest may not be heard, but this nonexistent invading army is closely watched by thousands of US agents."

—David Hoekema, *page 40*

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"Was I supposed to disown Jesus just so I could accept him again?"

—McKenzie Watson-Fore, *page 54*

Is an invasion still an invasion if there are no invaders?

# An uneasy calm at the border

by David A. Hoekema

THE TITLE OF A PRESIDENTIAL ORDER handed down on Inauguration Day announces a bold new initiative: "Protecting the American People Against Invasion." In 23 sections with dozens of subsections, the directive revokes a raft of the Biden administration's executive orders (on addressing the causes of migration, safe and orderly processing of asylum seekers, reunification of families, and more) and launches new enforcement measures. Thousands of active military troops are being dispatched to the Mexican border, supplementing the 16,500 Border Patrol officers and 2,200 National Guard members already deployed under Biden. The order fulfills one of President Trump's most repeated campaign promises: that on day one of his presidency he would move swiftly to detain and deport 11 million undocumented residents of the United States.

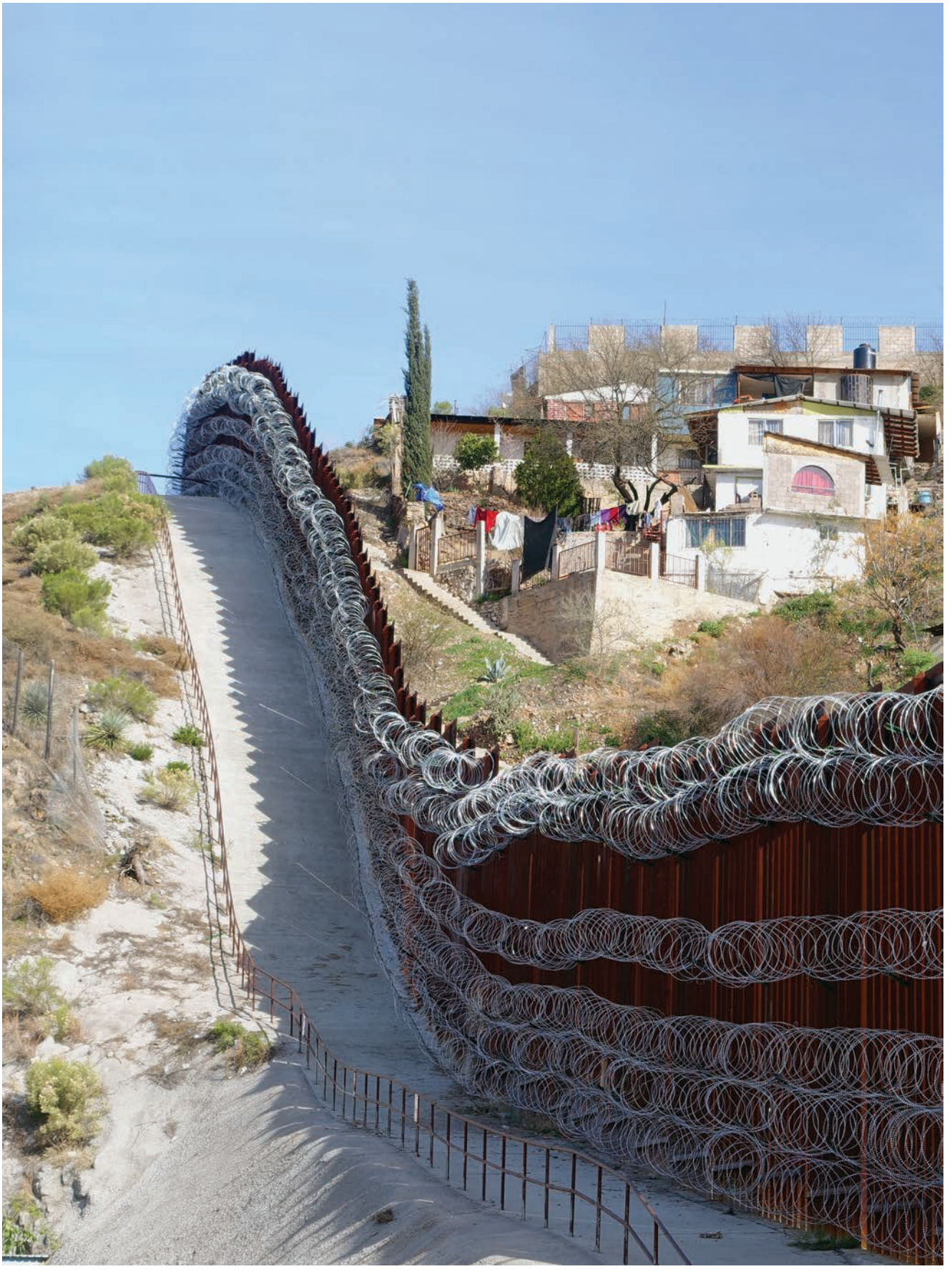
Trump has never felt constrained by facts. The alleged invasion, effective as it was as a campaign tactic, was one of his most transparent and egregious falsehoods. Those of us who live in the borderlands see a very different reality. My home in Green Valley, Arizona, is just 40 miles from Nogales, Sonora, where I travel often to visit migrant shelters, see my dentist, and visit favorite taquerias. From this vantage point, we have seen a dramatic ebb and flow of migration.

The massive influx in the first years of the 2020s, spanning the Trump and Biden presidencies, has given way to a sharp decline since 2023. Reported encounters between migrants and Border Patrol agents, leading either to release with a court date or to expulsion, reached 200,000 per month early in the Obama presidency, then dropped to a quarter of that number later in his term and early in his successor's. They climbed back to 200,000 per month late in Trump's first term, then higher still in the early Biden years. Since 2023, however, numbers have dropped even more sharply than in Obama's term. By late 2024, the border was quieter and more orderly than at any time in the past two decades. That decline has continued, both before Trump's inauguration and since.

What has caused these wide fluctuations? Stricter enforcement played a role. Obama, Trump, and Biden all tightened border security, and a divided Congress refused to offer any legal path to citizenship. Equally important in bringing order to the chaos on the border was the CBP One app made available to asylum seekers in 2023. By late 2024, more migrants were using the government app and following legal channels than were attempting to cross without permission. Mexican immigration officials, US Border Patrol agents, and humanitarian groups all welcomed the option of an orderly and legal process for asylum application.

If there was no invasion to repel, what changes have resulted from Trump's directives? On Inauguration Day, the asylum app was shut

Looking over the razor wire barrier in Nogales, Arizona, to the Mexican side of the border



DAVID A. HOEKEMA

# Lost Child

by Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

*For our brother Lou*

We always knew we would lose you.
The youngest child in a gaggle of cousins,
at two you wandered down the beach,
*I am the Boss* embossed on the bottom
of your toddler-size bathing suit.
An hour later our frantic search
ended when you waddled back to us,
sat your sturdy behind on our blanket
and picked up your shovel & bucket
still wearing your plastic sunglasses.

At five you got lost on the boardwalk,
strayed miles from us and from our hotel.
Later we found you were brought back
by a cop, whom you had the sense to tell
the name of the place he could find us,
*Normandy* a word you somehow knew,
its letters in neon green and blue,
though I'm sure you could not read it.

Getting older, you got lost faster
and could not be easily found.
Drugs, beer, girls, a near disaster
in your Jeep on the beach. The whole town
knew you were trouble, but loved you, too,
the same way we all felt about you.
Until you, at last, got lost for good.
Just like we always knew you would.

**ANGELA ALAIMO O'DONNELL** *is associate director of the Curran Center for American Catholic Studies at Fordham University.*

down and all scheduled initial asylum hearings were canceled. A few days later, at a shelter in Nogales, Sonora, I met families fleeing from death threats in Venezuela and Guatemala who presented themselves at the port of entry, showing agents the appointment confirmation that had been sent to them through the app months earlier, only to be turned away.

The beds at that shelter are now nearly empty. At a nearby shelter that accommodates families for longer stays, the dormitories are half empty. Shelter residents have lost all hope for asylum application, and they have lost their faith in the US government to honor its promises. Most are now leaving the shelters to return to their home countries—despite the dangers from which they fled—or to make a new life in northern Mexico.

In recent years, I have volunteered at the Nogales port of entry with a group called the Green Valley-Sahuarita Samaritans, helping new arrivals who passed their initial asylum interview and received a court date for a formal hearing. (I write as one of many volunteers, not in any official capacity, and do not speak for the Samaritans.) I've met them as they are released from Border Patrol screening and helped them find their way to their sponsors, most often churches or family members, elsewhere in the United States. This work is no longer needed, because no one is permitted to enter the country to apply for asylum. The temporary shelters in Tucson and Phoenix, where asylum seekers used to stay for a night or two in transit, are closing their doors.

Those whom I met at the border are settled now in new communities across the United States, waiting for years for their asylum hearing. Justice Department reports show 379,450 new asylum applications in 2022 and 2023. Among the cases heard in immigration court, less than 15 percent were approved. The backlog for asylum hearings has now reached more than 2 million, and yet every recent administration, Republican or Democratic, has poured money into enforcement without addressing the critical need for timely adjudication.

Until January, temporary residency was granted to those who passed an initial screening at the border and submitted a legal asylum appeal. But now ICE agents are arresting and deporting immigrants and asylum seekers regardless of their legal status. I think of the young Cuban lawyer whom I assisted a year ago on his way to join family members in New York. "I could not practice law in Cuba," he said, "after I criticized the government. So I opened a bakery. But the police raided my bakery and stole all my equipment. I have been waiting in Mexico for nine months until my appointment came up today, and now I have a place to live and work until my final court date." Very likely he is now being targeted for immediate deportation.

The promised mass expulsion of millions of undocumented residents, however, has not materialized. In January,

Left: The garden area of a Tucson-area shelter for asylum seekers that is expected to close because of federal budget cuts. Right: The dining hall at Kino Border Initiative, a shelter in Nogales, Arizona.

there were 29,000 Border Patrol encounters, most leading quickly to expulsion. That adds up to one arrest per month per agent on patrol. In February, the number was lower still. Newscasts and social media frequently show dramatic raids leading to arrests, but these are dramas staged for the camera rather than coordinated enforcement measures. Workplace raids in Illinois, New Jersey, and Texas swept up US citizens, including veterans, along with others. In Phoenix, a small army of armed ICE agents surrounded a home, setting off stun grenades from an armored vehicle and issuing demands through bullhorns, until one individual, a 61-year-old man who entered the country without papers two decades ago, voluntarily submitted to arrest to spare his family and neighbors further harassment. Another criminal apprehended, crowed the conservative media, without noting that his crimes were minor misdemeanors from many years earlier.

All the same, the situation on the border has changed dramatically in recent months. For many years, volunteers from churches and human rights organizations have fanned out across the desert, distributing water and food. The migrants we encounter nearly always ask to be directed to Border Patrol stations, where they are processed and then transferred to temporary detention facilities. Most are quickly deported, but some are released with a future court date. The number of these travelers has declined nearly to zero. One Samaritan volunteer told me she had seen no one at all for two weeks at a once-busy crossing point.

Is an invasion still an invasion if there are no invaders? A tree falling in a forest may be heard by no one, but the nonexistent invading army is closely observed by tens of thousands of US agents.

While the border is quieter in some ways, it is far more unsettled in others. When Samaritans report on their searches in the desert at the group's biweekly meetings, they often describe acts of vandalism. I've heard stories of water jugs slashed, of food caches ripped open and scattered. There have been occasional confrontations with militia members, self-appointed guardians of the border, but until recently, the abuse the volunteers endured was only verbal.

That may be changing now. Four Samaritan volunteers told us at a recent meeting that they'd been visiting a remote ranch near the border. The ranch's owner, knowing migrants often pass nearby, welcomes the water station located on his land. Vandalism had been reported a few days earlier, so the volunteers went to see whether the jugs were intact. They were. But near them stood several men, who pointed automatic weapons in the volunteers' direction and shouted at them to turn around.

The volunteers turned their SUV around to avoid any confrontation, but the armed men gave chase. As they passed a uniformed agent in his Border Patrol vehicle, the Samaritans called out to him: "What can we do about the vigilantes with guns who are chasing us?" "You'd better wait and let them talk to you," he replied. "They are federal agents."

The volunteers waited, they told us, until the men pulled up—none of them in uniform, none wearing any visible ID or agency badge, in a vehicle with no markings. Still pointing their guns, they ordered the group to step outside of their vehicle, demanded their passports, and put them in handcuffs. "You are violating federal law by helping illegals," they shouted, "and driving on this road is illegal too." (It is not.) After berating the volunteers for several minutes, the men returned the passports, but they confiscated a cell phone when one of the volunteers appeared to be filming them. At last they removed

DAVID A. HOEKEMA

The point of Trump's crackdown is not to send undocumented people away. It's to keep them where they are: underpaid, overworked, and afraid.

the handcuffs and released the Samaritans, warning them to be ready to answer criminal indictments. "On what charge?" they asked. Assaulting a federal agent, they were told.

Are these men really federal agents? Are they militia vigilantes? Or, more frightening still, are they both? Border watchers have told me that advisers to the president are recruiting and equipping "special agents" to patrol the border for both migrants and migrant sympathizers, all under no visible authority but their own. I have found no evidence to support these rumors. What we do know is that on April 11, the Trump administration—again citing the nonexistent crisis at the border—declared the entire southern border a closed military zone, authorizing active-duty military to arrest anyone they encounter, whether travelers from the south or volunteers from the north, and place them in military detention.

In recent years, relations between Samaritans and Border Patrol have been respectful and cooperative most of the time. When I toured the Border Patrol station near Nogales a few months ago, the agents emphasized that in their enforcement of immigration laws, protecting the health and safety of migrants was a high priority. They added that they are grateful for the Samaritans' efforts as well. But the agent to whom the recent volunteers turned for help evidently knew enough about the armed men and their tactics that he decided he should stand aside and watch the volunteers being treated as if they were the ones threatening to open fire with assault rifles.

It is evident that the purpose of the president's fearmongering rhetoric about an invasion is not to remove undocumented US residents. Trump and his wealthy supporters have nothing to gain, and a great deal to lose, if mass deportation were to become a reality rather than an empty boast. Manufacturing, agriculture, and the entertainment industry would all collapse if a large portion of their workforce were expelled. The lower the prestige and pay of an employment category in the American economy, the higher the proportion of openings filled by undocumented workers.

Trump and his allies in Congress know that their characterization of undocumented residents as criminals preying on citizens has no basis in fact. US citizens are twice as likely to commit crimes as undocumented residents, and four times as likely to commit violent crimes. How many of those now being detained and deported have criminal records is difficult to determine. Reporters estimate about half, based on interviews with federal agents and family members left behind, but agency reports are infrequent and inconsistent. One figure can be verified from court filings: of the government's deportation requests to immigration court in January and February of 2025, only 1 percent cite criminal acts other than illegal entry.

The sporadic enforcement actions undertaken so far have already gone a long way to achieve their unstated goal: to preserve an enormous pool of workers who will accept low wages, unsafe conditions, and job insecurity without complaint, knowing that appealing to a supervisor for fair treatment may trigger dismissal and deportation. Whether we acknowledge it or not, the American dream is built on the nightmares that workers in our fields, factories, and restaurants endure every day. The true purpose of Trump's crackdown on undocumented immigrants is not to send workers away, cutting into the profits of business owners, but to keep them just where they are: underpaid, overworked, unrepresented by unions, and living in constant fear of immigration authorities and self-appointed vigilantes.

Here in the borderlands, "Make America Great Again" could more honestly be expressed as "Make Everyone Afraid Again." On the US side of the border, volunteers who seek to help refugees from violence at home are now afraid that our efforts will lead to confrontation with unidentified armed men who may or may not be deputized by our government. On the Mexican side, those who still seek to cross are afraid of the relentless demands and violent actions of the drug cartels, who are perhaps the greatest beneficiaries of hardened US border policies since they can now demand tens of thousands of dollars to facilitate a crossing. Pastors and community workers are afraid to protest inhumane policies for fear of social media attacks and funding cutoffs. Politicians are afraid to stand up for their constituents and for the Constitution, lest they become targets of slander and libel.

"Perfect love casts out fear," advises scripture (1 John 4:18). My pastor, Alison Harrington, reminds us often that living under a repressive monarch who seeks to intimidate and manipulate has been a familiar experience for followers of Jesus throughout the history of the church. But neither an autocratic emperor in Rome nor a narcissistic bully in Washington can extinguish the Spirit's flame in our souls or empty our hearts of hope. Finding ourselves in the untracked borderland between the rule of law and the chaos of undeserved and unrestrained power, we can still help each other walk in the light. ❑

**DAVID A. HOEKEMA** *is professor of philosophy emeritus at Calvin University, visiting scholar at the University of Arizona, and author of* We Are the Voice of the Grass.

# The Last Summer of the Kumquat Tree

by Emma Galloway Stephens

*for John*

The tree bore fruit for one summer only.
A cluster of kumquats grew like a tumor in the heart;
the branches couldn't hold more than one year's yield,
each fruit as orange as the last morning
I held my brother's baby boy.

Some gravestones are no taller than weeds
blooming by the railroad tracks—one of them is his.
The wheel turns with brutality and haste.
One summer of hail and hurricane, and he is home,
though home for him is hallowed, ours a waste.

No coffin should be built that small.
No coffin should be built at all.

**EMMA GALLOWAY STEPHENS** *is cofounder of Arbor Institute for the Arts in Greenville, South Carolina, where she serves as director of education.*

"There was no disagreement as to whether we should engage," says Metropolitan AME pastor Bill Lamar, "but there was definitely a risk calculation."

# The church that now owns the name Proud Boys

interview by Jasmin Pittman

*William H. Lamar IV is pastor of Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington, DC. Earlier this year, a judge granted the historic Black church the rights to the name Proud Boys, which the church sued for after the far-right group didn't make payment on an earlier suit over members' vandalism of the church.*

**What was your initial reaction to this ruling? And what does this victory mean for the congregation?**
We were elated that in this case justice prevailed. American justice today tends to favor perpetrators and not victims, as with the commutations and pardons for the insurrectionists. But in this instance, for us to receive justice from the American justice system is something to mark and to celebrate.

**Did church members have complicated feelings about the decision? I understand the excitement at the opportunity that it represents, but I also wonder about fear over the attention it might attract.**
It was both. I think there was joy but also pain. It is painful to know that people cannot live and worship in peace without White supremacist political violence designed to quiet us, frighten us, and keep us from fully embracing what it means to be a citizen.

I recently went to a rally and listened to the great Sherrilyn Ifill as she talked about the 14th Amendment and how people have always pushed against it, from ratification to the moment when Ronald Reagan gave his first big campaign speech in Philadelphia, Mississippi, talking about states' rights on the bones of the murdered civil rights activists Andrew Goodman, James Cheney, and Michael Schwerner. It has been an unbroken assault—sometimes muscular, sometimes as subtle as a dog whistle, but unrelenting.

**I hear so much grief present in the weight of history.**
Yes.

**How do you hold space for lament?**
Two people come to mind. First, the great Otis Moss Jr., who, as you know, was a serious lieutenant during the civil rights movement of the '60s. He said that the great unfinished work of the movement was that of grief and lament. He said that we were so busy burying people, fighting, organizing, and strategizing that we could not mourn what we had lost.

I remember hearing that and not quite being able to catch its brilliance and wisdom. And then one of my professors, André Resner, wrote a book and talked about how every church has a praise team, but every church needs a lament team—there are psalms of lament that express the

William H. Lamar IV, pastor of Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington, DC

COURTESY PHOTO

challenge of grief and pain. We try our best to make space for lament in worship and in other communal spaces, because right now, here in Washington, the infliction of unnecessary pain on human beings is palpable.

We hear about people who have labored to serve the federal government with integrity and are not sure if they will have jobs or where their health care will come from. And these are people in the pews and their relatives and friends.

There is an unrelenting inhumanity in the American project that we as a people have tried to redeem. The question I often ask now is, Is redemption possible? I do not think it is possible if it is built on extraction. CENTURY readers who are in love with American mythology need to ask themselves, Must we continue to love this mythology that says one thing and produces another? Or can we come together, just like the White men who designed this system of inhumanity, and together design a system that is humane? That shares abundance? That believes that all human beings can thrive together as citizens?

**There were two lawsuits, one in 2023 after the Proud Boys' initial act of violence against your church and then this second one after they failed to abide by the first ruling. Given the risk involved, were there mixed feelings at your church about the decision to go forward with the second suit?**

There was no disagreement as to whether we should engage, but there was definitely a kind of risk calculation. Church members were asking me, What's going to happen to us? To you, to your wife? These people are violent. What kind of risk are we assuming?

But I think about it the same way as those in our tradition who also assumed risk: It was our time. Fannie Lou Hamer assumed the risk of sexual violence in Mississippi. Mamie Till-Mobley took a risk each time she would not let the death of her son go gently into a good night of silence. We kept saying this to ourselves in prayer—and the ancestors continue to say it to us. We can't do our work without ancestral conversation. The pattern is in the text: Jesus climbs a mountain and has a conversation with Moses and Elijah. The ancestors who communicate with us say, *There is a price to pay, but we call you to pay the price in your generation as we paid the price in ours.*

I do not believe that anybody who paid a serious price desired to do so. But they could not say no to what the Spirit gave them to do in their age. We could not say no, either. I want to be clear: We were not rushing toward it, but we knew what we had to do. It is ingrained in us. So we rose, and I'm thankful that we did.

**Are there any ancestors that you want to name right now?**
Yes. I start with Elizabeth Freeman, who was enslaved and sued for her freedom, and freedom for others, in the 1700s.

## Odyssey Sonnet

by Ava M. Pardue

Telemachus-like, we are waiting still
For justice in the house of the oppressed.
And how long will our Father wait to come,
To end so many years of loneliness?
These suitors lining up to steal your bride
Eat up the glory of your royal line.
They take pride in how fierce their vices are,
Corrupting every feast of bread and wine.
They plotted, too, to kill your only son
And even then your face did not appear;
Odysseus, where are you this dark night
While your own bride must cry so many tears?

But rosy-fingered Dawn will break the frost.
The Father will restore what has been lost.

**AVA M. PARDUE** *is a student at Wheaton College in Illinois.*

Beulah Mae Donald, whose son was lynched by the Klan. She sued the Klan in the 1980s, and along with millions of dollars she won the Klan's headquarters in Alabama. Pauli Murray, Charles Hamilton Houston, and Constance Baker Motley, who navigated the legal system as one strategy for freedom. The ancestors of the AME Church, who had to sue White Methodists for the right to exist as an autonomous body.

**Can you speak to the power of naming things?**
That's a beautiful question. We have to name things clearly because we live in a time of obfuscation. We are inundated with disinformation. We swim in a soup of lies so thick that often the truth is not recognizable, not unless you pull back and nurture your ability to see and operate truthfully. So we name things to connect our humanity, to say that what we are feeling is real because we feel it together. We name it communally, and this allows us to address what we see.

**In the wake of the racist vandalism of your church, how have you balanced pastoral care needs with public prophetic witness?**
It is my dedication to pastoral care that has made this possible. If I had not been visiting people—standing at their bedsides before and after surgery, standing with them at the time of birth and death—they would not have risked this with me, and they would have been right not to risk it with me. You do not take this kind of risk with someone who has not shown that they love you. That's what allows me to say and do prophetic things—it is rooted in the pastoral. And they have proven that they love me as pastor as well.

I think that if you look at the ministry of Jesus, his deep compassion for humanity is what allowed him to say and do what he did. You cannot make prophetic withdrawals if you do not make pastoral deposits. I hate to use market banking language, but you just can't do it.

**Speaking of banking language—in a recent interview you mentioned the idea of "reverse capitalism" and putting the funds received from the trademark back into the community. Could you say more about that idea?**
I don't see how following Jesus can square with American extractive capitalism. Now, like all of us I am deeply ensconced within the capitalist milieu. But I want to exist there the way Madam C. J. Walker did. She leveraged capitalism, but her mind was not captured or colonized by it. She used her resources to build wealth within the Black community.

We have to build a solidarity economy where we can. And though we are deeply entrenched in capitalism, we must know that the system itself is built on oppression.

In *One Nation Under God*, Kevin Kruse explains how corporate America cranked up its power to get the church to preach a gospel of capitalism—just as Franklin Roosevelt was seeking to do something different with the New Deal. It's all documented. Do I love Franklin Roosevelt? Not a whole

"How is it that the people who founded Metropolitan AME were such moral giants compared to those who founded the National Cathedral?"

lot. The New Deal was able to pass because he cut my people out of it—agricultural workers and domestic workers. Still, he was trying to say that the government should serve those who are poor and struggling. And corporate America built and funded a church that would fight solidarity.

It's a church we see the remnants of today. It supports Donald Trump. It was created by money, by a view of the world that says we have to use people's religion to build a system that keeps us in power. I think it aligns with the Constantinian capture of the church—*by this sign you conquer*. The American church is captured.

We in the Black prophetic tradition have always said, "Follow us." Here's the example I give: The people who founded the National Cathedral were so morally small that they built a church and said that people like me could not enter it. Metropolitan AME was founded 187 years ago, and the people who founded it never, ever had a theology or an understanding of segregation. How is it that the people who founded Metropolitan AME were such moral giants compared to those who founded the cathedral?

What are we enraptured by? What are we imprisoned by? This city venerates Washington, Jefferson, Monroe, and Madison. People often excuse their failings by saying, "They were men of their time." No. The gospel was readily available then. There were other communities they could have looked to, in the sweep of world history, that chose *not* to build an extractive and exploitative system. They do not get a pass because they were men of their time. I'm a man of my time. I don't own no damn body.

When you excuse them, you give safe harbor to those people today who are whispering similar things—that government that's competent has to be led by White men.

**Has this whole series of incidents made it harder to do ministry in DC?**

Recently, when it's time to preach—right up until the last moment—I often feel empty. I feel like I'm giving so much away that sometimes when I need resources for myself, my family, for the vocation, more often than not I'm feeling spent. But I'm doubling down on the practices that give me joy. Music. Watching the sunrise. Sitting down and intentionally remembering the voices of my grandparents. Hearing their voices, seeing their smiles, smelling their clothing in my mind's eye and knowing that I am surrounded by innumerable witnesses. They push me forward and caress me when I lie down to sleep.

**What would you say to churches that want to take a firmer stance of resistance but are feeling hesitant or afraid of what they might lose?**

I understand the very human desire to protect what we have and not to "wade in the water." I sang that song as a child, but now I'm 50 years old, and I think I'm beginning to understand. When you ask about those who want to wade into resistance but are afraid, I hear my ancestors singing: "Wade in the water / God's going to trouble the water." Our God is a water-troubling God. Unless we wade into the waters that God has been troubling since the primordial moments of creation, unless we move through those waters to what God is still seeking to create today, we will never become what we confess that we are in our creeds and in the best of our theologies. We have to take up the mantle as cocreators with God and find out what is possible.

Is that easy? No. And nobody wants to say this, but some of us will die in the troubled waters. It is not God's will that we die. It is God's will that we live. But not all of us will survive.

The question is, if you sit and watch, what kind of life do you have? Is it worth living if you quietly sit in your quiet churches and watch this system, which is wedded to American Christianity, kill human beings? We are not always strong. Sometimes we're immobilized by fear. But we wade in the water. I'm looking for fellow waders, and I know they're there. I know they exist. ❑

**JASMIN PITTMAN** *is assistant editor at the* CENTURY.

Reading *After Virtue* as a student was a revelation.
Later, I continued to learn from the philosopher as his colleague.

# Alasdair MacIntyre retains his power to shock

by Jean Porter

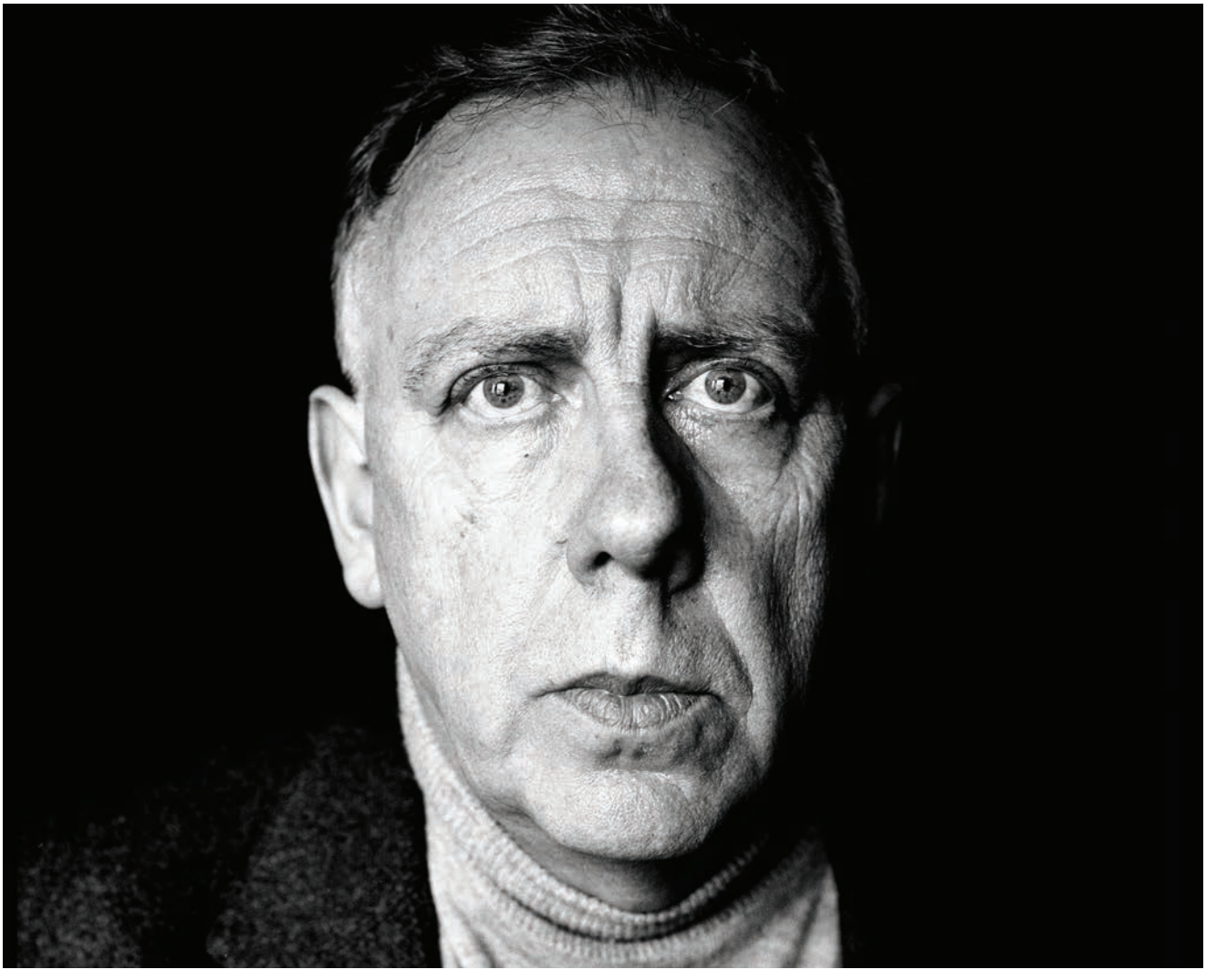
I STILL REMEMBER the first time I read Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. I was a graduate student in religious ethics at Yale, and someone, perhaps my adviser, suggested that I take a look at it. As I recall, it was recommended to me as a novelty, an interesting alternative to the analytic approach that dominated moral philosophy and, to a considerable extent, religious ethics as well. I certainly found this in MacIntyre, who died May 21, but I also found much more. To me, *After Virtue* had the force of a revelation. It opened up the possibility of a different way of studying and thinking about ethics, whether secular or religious: a discourse dominated by historically embedded conceptions of the good, grounded in ideals of honor, integrity, and, of course, virtue.

To a young aspiring scholar formed in the dry ascetical discourse of 20th-century moral philosophy, this made for exhilarating reading. I remember going to my professors, brimming over with new possibilities, ready to direct my whole doctoral program toward a study of moral traditions. They calmed me down and cautioned me against moving too quickly into this new approach. And I took their advice, but only up to a point. By the end of my graduate program I had begun to distance myself from some elements of MacIntyre's program. I found that I was not entirely persuaded by his critique of the Enlightenment understanding of rationality, or perhaps I should say that I began to give more weight to the continuities between premodern and Enlightenment conceptions of rationality than MacIntyre did. Nonetheless, by that point he had already shaped my approach to the discipline of theological ethics—and to moral reflection more generally—in profound ways. He showed me the value of looking at a moral concept or debate in light of its historical and social context, and from that point it was impossible for me to see these things any other way.

I have spent some time describing my first reactions to *After Virtue* because, as I soon learned, these were not just *my* reactions. It was one of those books that became a touchstone for a whole generation of young scholars because it opened up a new, promising way of approaching a familiar subject. We had been trained to think in terms of abstractions, principles, and logical arguments.

Religious ethics, too, generally

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre



STEVE PYKE / GETTY

emphasized abstraction over the concrete particularities of experience and belief. MacIntyre challenged this whole way of viewing the field, in the most uncompromising terms.

Within the field of religious ethics, many of us were eager for just this kind of message. We had been excited by the writings of Stanley Hauerwas, whose work was, from the beginning, resolutely theological, grounded in the particularities of the Christian tradition and above all centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ. MacIntyre was therefore not the first to suggest to us that the field of religious ethics might be due for an overhaul (although Hauerwas himself was inspired by MacIntyre's work from a very early stage of his own career). But he brought new ideas and new ways of thinking about our field, complementary to Hauerwas's approach and yet distinctive. Hauerwas was a Christian theologian whose work focused on theological ethics; MacIntyre was a philosopher sympathetic to theology, but he did not attempt to do theology himself. Each offered something of value to those of us working in religious ethics, or as we now say, theological ethics. And each one retains his power to shock, to open up possibilities for new ways of thinking about the moral life and our attempts to reflect seriously on what it means to be good or faithful.

Thanks to the title of his most famous book, MacIntyre is often referred to as a virtue ethicist. But that is not how he thought of himself, although he did do important work in this area. In my opinion, his primary contribution lies elsewhere, in his work on what he called "tradition-guided inquiry" and the possibilities for rational thought in a world of particularities. He offers a detailed account of this in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, grounding his analysis in a close reading of Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and Hume. Similarly, in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*, he argues that Aquinas's integration of the seemingly incompatible perspectives of Aristotle and Augustine laid the foundation for a successful tradition of inquiry, with real staying power even in the face of the challenges of modernity.

MacIntyre's return to tradition and social particularity was shockingly new to my peers and me, but as we came to

I was not entirely persuaded by MacIntyre's critique of Enlightenment thinking. But by that point he had already profoundly shaped my approach to moral reflection.

see, similar claims had been made many times before, from many different intellectual quarters. Still, MacIntyre was not content to shock us out of complacency; he went on to take up the hard challenge of reclaiming rationality, or perhaps I should say, offering an ideal of rationality consistent with the tradition-bound nature of all inquiry.

He did so by working out an account of how traditions develop, identify inadequacies, and correct themselves, in the process generating notions of intellectual adequacy and error. These notions can then be applied to other traditions of inquiry, and to one's own tradition, seen in relation to these others. Through comparison, facilitated through a kind of two-way translation, the other tradition may appear as lacking in its ability to address fundamental questions. But it may not—indeed, it may well transcend one's own tradition in its explanatory power. In this way, tradition-grounded inquiry can be self-critical, even to the point of abandoning one's original starting points to embrace a better alternative. MacIntyre's work in *After Virtue* is greatly influential, but his later work on tradition and inquiry represents something much more difficult and valuable: real progress on seemingly intractable philosophical difficulties.

So far, I have focused on MacIntyre's liberating effects on those of us working in the field of religious or theological ethics. I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that he, together with Hauerwas and a few others, created the field of theological ethics as it existed in the 1980s and '90s, or at least he helped to create the conditions in which theological ethics could emerge. At the same time, he also contributed directly to theology and theological ethics in ways that clearly reflected his overall philosophical project yet also went beyond it.

By the early 1980s, MacIntyre was a practicing Catholic, and from the mid-80s onward Catholicism clearly shaped his intellectual work. He also wrote and spoke on explicitly theological topics, including the meaning of human dignity as understood within the Catholic tradition, the nature and limits of God's foreknowledge, and the distinctive character of authority within the church.

One of my personal favorites among his theological works is his lecture, "Catholic Instead of What?" delivered in 2019 at Notre Dame. In this lecture, he began by observing that Catholics are defined by what they believe, assertions grounded in doctrine, but also by what they do not believe, claims which to a considerable extent are rooted in the contingencies of society. For today's Catholics, these include scientific naturalism and irredeemable tragedy, the first because it denies even the possibility of nonmaterial causes and the second because it forecloses any kind of hope. To which I can only say, "Hear, hear!"

I was privileged to be MacIntyre's colleague twice, at Vanderbilt and at Notre Dame. I cannot say that I ever knew him well. But over the years I got to know him a little better, mostly thanks to his efforts to reach out to me. In my dissertation, I had ventured some criticisms of his work, and he went over these with me, without the least hint of rancor or condescension. He extended the same kindness to me every time I published anything on his work: he sought me out, sat down with me, and went through everything, in a spirit of a genuine investment in the issues. Sometimes he agreed with me, often he did not, but in any case what mattered to him were the issues themselves. I don't believe I have ever known an academic with less investment in his own ego.

I learned so much from MacIntyre, as a scholar, a philosopher, and a human being, and I believe that I will continue to learn from him as long as I am doing this work. And again, I am not alone in this. A whole generation of scholars is in his debt. ❑

**JEAN PORTER** *is professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.*

# Changing

by Joseph Bathanti

At family picnics in North Park,
the women—the girls too—

my mother and sister,
aunts and cousins—

my French grandmother
refused to enter a public pool—

cloistered hip to hip
in my uncles' dark foreboding sedans

to undress and slip into bathing suits.
They draped the windows with towels.

Plymouths and Pontiacs
turned into palaces,

the picnic a fable,
the park a realm.

Transfigured, milk-white,
they emerged from the automobiles,

and filed dutifully—
hands lifted against

the pleading light—
into the spangled blue water.

**JOSEPH BATHANTI**, *the former poet laureate of North Carolina, is professor of English at Appalachian State University and author of* Light at the Seam.

At youth group and church camp, I learned to perform my own unworthiness. It took years to recognize the spiritual harm this caused.

# Dear Jesus, Am I broken enough yet?

by McKenzie Watson-Fore

I WAS SIX YEARS OLD when I officially became a Christian. Mom sat with me on the cornflower-blue couch in the living room and led me in a simple prayer: We asked Jesus to forgive my sins and come live inside my heart.

I wish I could recall it well enough to know if I felt cleansed, seized, or, as John Wesley once put it, "strangely warmed." I wish I could recall if I felt anything at all.

I was a prepubescent scrap of a girl—nine years old—the first time I went to camp on the shores of Milford Lake in Kansas, a lake edged by sycamores, scrub grass, and cicadas. That opalescent oasis quickly became my favorite place on earth. Jesus made sense there. Milford Lake became my personal Sea of Galilee—the place where God's spirit chose to dwell. I spent camp swollen with wonder, hoping that nothing would ever puncture that feeling.

The summer before ninth grade, the camp theme was "lost"—as in, *We're all lost without Jesus*, but the TV show *Lost* was also big right then, so it doubled as a pop-culture touchpoint. One morning, Pastor Brennan—the bearded father figure in charge—asked us to remember a time when we'd felt lost. Then he sent us off with our Bibles, journals, and pens to reflect.

The structure was always the same: daily devotionals would deepen our awareness of how badly we needed Jesus, and at the end of the week we would be given a chance to accept Christ. We needed to understand that we were lost before we could be found. This wasn't just the arc of the week at camp; it was our entire evangelical framework. First you recognized your sin. Then you could be redeemed.

But something inside me—my sinful nature?—resisted this framework. I sat in the scrubby grass and propped the spiral-bound camp booklet on my knees. What if I didn't meet the prerequisite for redemption? My loopy cursive slanted across the page. "There have been many times when I was lost," I lied. The sky loomed over me like a slab of azure-tinted cement. Pastor Brennan had shifted the onus onto each of us to identify an experience that would complete the metaphor of salvation, but I wasn't sure I could.

Thursday night, the penultimate evening, was come-to-Jesus time: Cry Night. More than a talk, it was a whole pageant of salvation, a cathartic performance of redemption and renewal in which we were all expected to take part. The idea was that we campers would be so moved by the demonstration of God's love that we would give our lives to him anew. We would be "receptive to the talk": the emotional intensity of the night would prick our hearts with guilt, and

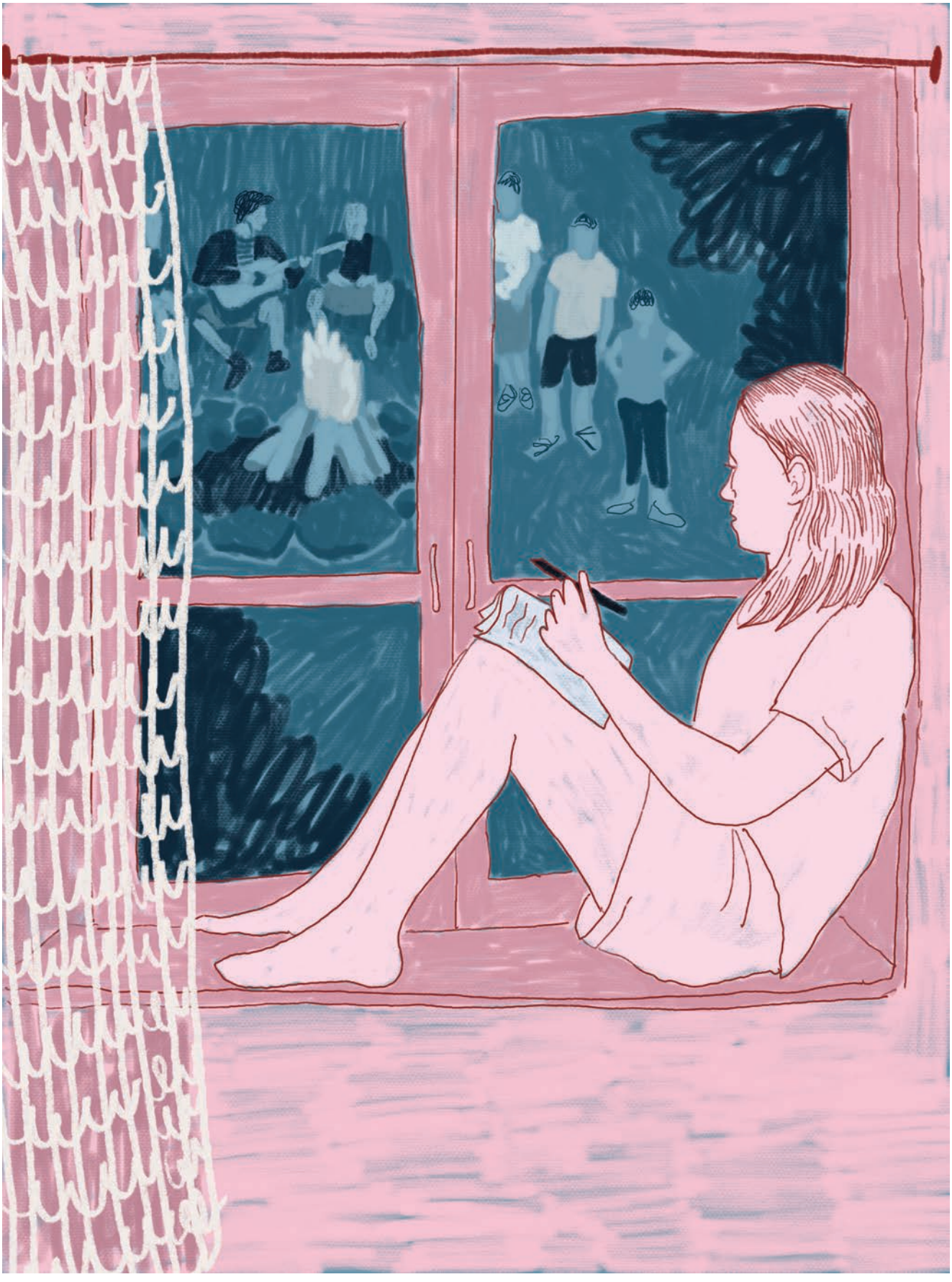


*Illustration by Martha Park*

we would turn ourselves over to God, hostages to our need for forgiveness. We would be emotionally bludgeoned into transformation.

"Go out under the stars," Pastor Brennan directed. "We'll make a bonfire. Whatever sins you've been struggling with, write them down, and you can toss them into the blaze."

Campers drifted out into the night. Scattered across the prickly hill, kids were giving and re-giving their lives to Jesus. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't give my life to Jesus if he already had it—right?

I generally felt pretty close to God, and I almost never felt closer than when I was at camp. But right then, looking down over my peers in the throes of spiritual renewal, I didn't feel close to God at all. I huddled in the parched grasses and wrapped my arms around my knees, trying to stay warm. Students down near the shelter were crying and praying with counselors: a chasm of flame and shadow, weeping and gnashing of teeth. Anxiety rose like an anthill in my stomach. If I couldn't bring myself to confess before God, did that mean I was estranged from him? Had I been deluded about my spiritual status my whole life?

Two contradictory voices launched an argument inside my mind. What did I have to confess? If I followed the prescribed steps—scribbling a sin on the scrap of paper, surrendering it to the flames, crying until I felt myself purified and renewed—just for the sake of performing the choreography, wasn't that its own kind of dishonesty? But how could I think I had nothing to confess? That idea betrayed a dangerous arrogance, the heresy that I had somehow received "enough" salvation. I was a wretch. If it weren't for God's ongoing grace, I would be dead in my sin a thousand times over, a rotting corpse with flies eating my eyes.

Was I supposed to disown Jesus so that I could accept him again? Was my refusal to re-invite him into my heart evidence of pride or subconscious rebellion? I wanted one of the counselors to tell me how to respond, but they were probably all occupied with the kids having real spiritual crises. I wasn't the lost sheep; I was one of the 99. Maybe that meant I wasn't Jesus' concern.

The bonfire burned down to smoldering coals while I walked alone through the outer darkness. A sneering voice in my head whispered that I wasn't good enough for God because I'd never been bad.

Back in the tent, my friends were having a heart-to-heart. LeAnn said she'd been really convicted. "After tonight, I feel closer to God than I have in a long time," she said.

"Don't you guys ever just wanna rob a bank or something, so you can really experience forgiveness?" I asked. The other girls' faces betrayed total confusion.

"You don't need to rob a bank in order to experience forgiveness, McKenzie," Jenny said. "We all need God's forgiveness, all the time." But I couldn't perform spiritual brokenness I didn't feel. I clicked off the flashlight. In the darkness, I wondered how I could feel closer to God without first feeling far away.

Back home at youth group, we watched clips of an R-rated movie about a village in Kenya ravaged by man-eating lions. "Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour," my youth pastor read (1 Pet. 5:8). We had to stay vigilant and alert, to watch out for sin stalking its way into our hearts.

Life became a sin scavenger hunt. At the end of every day, I curled up with my journal in my blue-and-green loft bed for a moral inventory. "How have I been disappointing you lately, God?" I wrote. "I don't know how to kill my pride. Do I need to have more faith?" I berated myself: "Either I haven't realized that my sin is offensive and hurtful to you and I need to change, or I don't care! God, I don't want to be apathetic—lukewarm. Please, soften my heart."

Self-criticism became a bid for divine attention. The more I reiterated my sins, the more aware I was of my need for forgiveness, which meant the more grateful I would be for salvation.

"Today at church," I wrote, "Mark the Youth Pastor said we're not fully dependent on your grace because we don't understand how badly we need it. God, I do not know the depths of my own depravity!" An internal voice grew strong in my mind, meticulous and insistent. The sin monitor had one job: surveillance and recordkeeping of my sins, to protect me from the risk of thinking I didn't need Jesus.

Without realizing it, I had instrumentalized my self-criticism. Shame operated as a tool that allowed me to approach God correctly, as a humble recipient of undeserved grace. Self-abasement became my religious practice.

Over a decade later, I read *In the Dream House*, Carmen Maria Machado's memoir about an abusive relationship. In a section titled "Dream House as Inventory," Machado writes of her partner, "She makes you tell her what is wrong with you. This is a favorite activity; even better than her telling you what is wrong with you. Years later, it's a habit that's hard to break."

My sophomore year of high school: another church camp. This one was our annual spring break trip to California, where we stayed at our youth pastor's parents' house.

These spring break trips were supposed to be life-changing. It was 2009, and our cultural touchpoint was the iPhone. In keeping with the formula, we had to start by recognizing our sinfulness, so the first night we gathered in the living room for a talk titled "iSuck." Pastor Mark hit all the basics: everyone has sinned; no one is exempt from damnation. Sin separates us from God, who is the source of all goodness. Later in the week, Mark would get around to salvation, but we couldn't get there without first contemplating depravity.

I perched at the top of the stairs, a bystander to the closed system below: a writhing mosh pit of repentance.

After the talk, I slunk upstairs with my purple polka-dot journal. This was the gospel, the story I'd been steeped in my whole life. I had to make sure I didn't become numb to it. My sinfulness should grieve me. Maybe I could journal myself there.

"God," I wrote, "I am *really* awful. No matter how many times I write that, I'm not sure I get it. I mean, every cell in me is inherently evil. I cannot—I lack the capability to—do *any* good whatsoever on my own." I whipped myself into a devotional frenzy. "Since I am full of sin even from the day of conception (Psalm 51:5)," I wrote, "I cannot exist in your presence. That's the implication my filthy sin has! Everything that is good will be taken from me for eternity if I am not absolved!"

Religious scrupulosity is defined as the obsessive analysis of the moral dimensions of everyday life. Psychologists identify it as maladaptive, which means it provides immediate but temporary relief, while undermining health and wholeness in the long term. When scrupulosity reaches a clinically significant level, it is diagnosed as a subtype of obsessive compulsive disorder.

Obsessive compulsive behavior is distinguished by ritual activities done to offset anxiety: checking the stove, fixating on numbers, washing one's hands. In a way, the religious cycle of brokenness, repentance, and renewal mirrors this anxious behavior. You feel bad, you perform a ritual to address the bad feeling, and then you feel better. Until you don't—so you do it again and again. You grow dependent on the ritual, but it ceases to solve the anxiety. The cycle becomes a snare.

The next day of the spring break trip was beach day. The other girls and I layered Soffe shorts over our one-piece swimsuits and spent the bus ride through Orange County French-braiding each other's hair, singing "Ocean Avenue" by Yellowcard whenever we caught a glimpse of the churning Pacific surf. We dove under the waves and lay on towels and laughed ourselves silly while burying each other in the sand. We roasted hot dogs over a bonfire and explored coastal rock formations and took a dozen pictures of the sun colliding with the horizon. But those carefree, effortless hours didn't last.

We returned from the beach sweaty and salty and with barely enough time to rinse off before that night's talk: "iBreak." Mark preached on the difference between a proud person and a broken person. On a whiteboard, he drew two columns.

"Proud people have a critical, fault-finding spirit," he wrote. On the other side, "Broken people are compassionate. They forgive much because they know how much they have been forgiven."

"Proud people are self-protective," while "broken people are self-denying."

The room was packed with tired bodies. Heat emanated from our sunburnt skin. With each bullet point, I felt myself sinking. My self-ignorance was deeper and more dangerous than the ocean we'd splashed in. My every action was tarnished by pride. Every desire, corroded.

"Proud people have a desire to be recognized and affirmed." "Broken people have a sense of their unworthiness."

I couldn't escape the cresting realization. Mark's summary of the proud person described *me*. Shame stained my cheeks. I felt revolted by my own soiled personhood. All I wanted was to flee.

After the talk, I sought refuge in my journal. "How can I start being broken?" I implored. "I can't just start acting the way a broken person would act, though, because then I would be nothing more than a hypocrite. Please break my spirit," I prayed. "In Luke 20, it says anyone who falls on Jesus will be broken to pieces. That's what I want!" I probed my

relationship with God for cracks, which I was determined to find but unwilling to manufacture.

That Thursday night—Cry Night, Come-to-Jesus Night—Pastor Mark preached that we could confess our sins and be reconciled to Christ. The periwinkle light outside was fading. Jonathan, who led the worship band, brushed his fingers over the strings of his acoustic guitar.

The air shimmered with intensity. The Holy Spirit was in our midst.

One of the seniors—a popular guy named Chris who would eventually pursue a career in missions—raised his hand. "I think God is telling me there's something I need to confess," he said. He stood. The words flushed out of him in a torrent. "My girlfriend and I haven't stayed pure. We get naked together all the time. We haven't had sex, but we call it pretend sex—and it's been pulling me away from God. I need to come clean."

"You are forgiven," Mark said. Tears glowed in the boy's eyes. Chris's words set off a chain reaction, a domino train of confession and repentance. One kid admitted to smoking pot; a girl burst into tears and said she'd been looking at porn. Student after student stood and acknowledged their brokenness and sank to their knees in grief and reassurance. No sin was too much: everyone who confessed could be forgiven.

Jonathan strummed chords to the self-effacing worship songs we sang each week. The lyrics reverberated off the walls of my mind: "A thousand times I've failed, still your mercy remains." Over and over, Jonathan repeated the phrase. Open weeping blurred into grateful praise. Once they felt cleansed, my peers rose to their feet and lifted their arms, rejoicing. Others, limp with relief, wilted to the floor.

I perched at the top of the stairs, a bystander to a closed system that didn't include me. I wanted to be down in the fray, thrashing my body in the mosh pit of repentance, joining the others in their mourning and renewal. I wanted to feel forgiveness wash over me. I wanted to feel my heart strangely warmed. I wanted to feel. But the contradictions of my beliefs kept me trapped there, my skin an electric fence. I ached to be as worthy of God's attention as the lost sheep.

Every three to four months I packed my duffel bag, climbed into the church van, and drove off to do it again. And when I came home, I mustered the enthusiasm to tell my nonbelieving friends that I'd had such a great time, that next time they should come, so they could rip their chests open, too, and stare into the void of their unworthiness. So they could be saved.

The rituals of church camp ignored the fundamental assertion that nothing could separate me from the love of God (Rom. 8:39). Psalm 139, which I memorized for one of those spring break trips, says it's impossible to hide from God. On calm days, I believed God was closer to me than the vocal cords I used to whisper his name. Why did our leaders spend so much time insisting how far from God we were? Participation in these rituals, multiple times a year, was like turpentine, stripping away my ability to self-evaluate. The repetition carved neural pathways in the putty of my mind that would prove more powerful than any memorized points of theology, any string of verses.

Throughout high school, I watched as friends' brains developed addictions to the pattern of gratuitous confession, emotional upheaval, and catharsis. Meanwhile, I couldn't complete the cycle. My faith was weaponized against me. I began to doubt my own experience, to question my convictions and defer to others. When my inner voice contradicted my leaders' teachings, I stopped listening to myself altogether. My own voice became foreign to me, suspect and untrustworthy.

The men who ran my youth group believed these practices and rituals would draw us closer to God. But systems have a way of transcending the intentions of the individuals who enforce them. The system self-perpetuates at any expense. Those who should have protected me supported the system, even as it consumed its adherents.

No Spirit settled on me. No tongues of fire, no cloak of brokenness. For years, I believed God was passing over me. I interpreted my lack of brokenness to mean that I didn't deserve God's presence. These instances—when everyone else seemed touched by God except for me—equated to divine abandonment. As the evangelical slogan asks, "If you feel far from God, who moved?"

This is what religious trauma looks like. I still find myself facing down the blade of a manufactured inner voice hell-bent on convincing me of my unworthiness. I've spent much of my life hunched over the whetstone of the church, sharpening that blade. We called this discipleship; we called it cultivating humility. But those terms misdirect. My inner knowing was invalidated and erased. These rituals negated my sense of safety and replaced it with beliefs of my unworthiness. It took me years to find the right language for all this: spiritual violence.

If I could, I would sneak back through the years, back into the living room of that spring break house, one last time. I'd slip up the stairs to where my 15-year-old self is crouched, paralyzed with shame, and I'd take her clammy hand.

"We can leave," I say. Her eyes are full of fear. My fingers tighten around hers. "No one is paying attention to us."

She glances at the floor below, where the other kids writhe, pierced by the arrows of conviction. We slip out the sliding glass back door, past the fenced yard, into the open field beyond.

"Don't I need to be forgiven?" she asks.

I shake my head. "Nothing is wrong with you. This is the good news." ❑

**MCKENZIE WATSON-FORE** *is a writer, an artist, and executive editor of* sneaker wave *magazine.*

# A Gathering of Physicists

by Janice Freytag

It was 1979, and our freshman class
of physics majors had cosmic aspirations.
We wanted to be an irresistible force.
We wanted to be waves rippling across space,
undiminished by friction or wind resistance.
We wanted to be beams of light,
traveling straight and true through the universe.

We were superior to other scientists.
Biologists could not reassemble the life they dissected.
Chemists only made plastics and adhesives and poisonous gas.
But we had light, and light was immortal.
We could split her, filter her,
bounce her forever through a gauntlet of mirrors.
Light would never die. And we would be light.

But even light bends to gravity, and here we were,
decades later, pulled back to the labs where we first met.
We had been dimmed by dust.
Dark matter was real. Black holes had claimed some of us.
Life had run us through its spectrometer
to show us what we were made of.
We were found wanting.

We should have heard the cosmic microwave
background playing like Muzak in our ears.
We should have foreseen the accelerating
expansion of all we didn't know.
We should have searched sooner and harder
for the God-particle. Here at the end,
we tell each other we should have believed.

**JANICE FREYTAG** *worked in postwar Bosnia and now lives in Pennsylvania.*

How a staged legal proceeding in a small town became the catalyst for a century of culture wars

# The Scopes Monkey Trial and the evolution of fundamentalism

by Michael A. Smith

On July 10, 1925, the small town of Dayton, Tennessee, became the unlikely epicenter of a clash that reverberated through US history for a century. The trial of John T. Scopes, a young high school teacher charged with violating Tennessee's Butler Act by teaching the theory of evolution, transcended its immediate legal context to become what historian Edward J. Larson has described as a watershed in American cultural history. As we mark the centenary of this landmark moment, examining both the events leading up to the Scopes Monkey Trial and its aftermath can help us understand how a staged legal proceeding in a small town became the catalyst for a century of culture wars that continue to shape US public life.

The trial is often remembered as a straightforward confrontation between science and religion. In fact it was a complex intersection of theological disputes, cultural anxieties, media transformation, and economic opportunism. What began in the 19th century as a theological debate among Protestant intellectuals would help establish the foundation for the modern religious right and what scholars now recognize as Christian nationalism.

To understand the impact of the Scopes trial, we must consider the theological disputes that gave birth to fundamentalism as a distinct religious movement within American Protestantism. The roots of this movement extend back to Princeton Theological Seminary in the mid-19th century, where theologians developed what became known as Princeton theology.

Princeton theology, articulated by figures like Charles Hodge, his son A. A. Hodge, and Benjamin Warfield, emerged as a response to the growing influence of higher biblical criticism imported from Germany, which applied historical and literary analysis to scriptural texts. The Princeton theologians advocated for biblical inerrancy, including in matters of science and history. Charles Hodge's systematic theology established the foundations for this position, articulating a view of scripture as divinely inspired and factually accurate across all domains. Historian George Marsden identifies this period as crucial in establishing the intellectual framework that would later define fundamentalist approaches to scripture.

By the late 19th century, these theological disputes had intensified as evolutionary theory gained prominence and scientific acceptance following Charles Darwin's 1859 book *On the Origin of Species*. The emerging sciences of geology and paleontology posed additional challenges to literal interpretations of biblical creation narratives. In this context, conservative theologians began organizing to defend orthodox Christianity against modernist influences.

Between 1910 and 1915, the publication of *The Fundamentals*, a series of essays funded by California oil millionaires Lyman and Milton Stewart, marked a key moment in the development of fundamentalism as a self-conscious movement. These essays, distributed free to pastors,

Proceedings during the 1925 Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee, were moved outside due to large crowds and intense summer heat.

BETTMANN ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES

missionaries, and religious workers across America, articulated the core doctrines that fundamentalists considered nonnegotiable, including biblical inerrancy, the virgin birth and deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection, and the historical reality of Christ's miracles.

As historian Randall Balmer notes, this early fundamentalism was primarily concerned with theological issues, not political ones. The movement initially focused on maintaining theological orthodoxy within denominations and educational institutions, not on influencing public policy.

This theological battle would soon spill into the public sphere, however, as fundamentalists grew increasingly concerned about the teaching of evolution in public schools. By the early 1920s, their focus had expanded beyond denominational politics to education policy. William Jennings Bryan, a three-time Democratic presidential nominee and former Secretary of State, emerged as a leading voice against evolutionary teaching, arguing that it undermined religious faith and promoted materialistic views that he associated with German militarism in World War I.

Bryan's entrance into the evolution controversy marked a shift, bringing fundamentalist concerns from seminary classrooms and denominational meetings into public policy debates. His advocacy helped inspire anti-evolution legislation in several states, including the Butler Act in Tennessee, which would become the legal basis for the Scopes trial.

The Butler Act, enacted in March 1925, prohibited teaching that humans descended from a lower order of animals and "any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible." However, the trial would never have occurred without a remarkable confluence of opportunistic interests.

Shortly after the Butler Act's passage, the American Civil Liberties Union advertised in Tennessee newspapers that it would defend any teacher willing to challenge the law. The ad caught the attention of a group of Dayton businessmen, led by George Rappleyea, who saw an opportunity to put their struggling town on the map. As Edward Larson documents in his Pulitzer Prize–winning account *Summer for the Gods*, these men convinced Scopes, a 24-year-old general science teacher and football coach who occasionally substituted for the biology teacher, to serve as the test case.

Scopes later remarked that he was not sure he had actually ever taught evolution. Nevertheless, he agreed to stand as a defendant, and Rappleyea swore out the warrant for Scopes's arrest on May 5.

The manufactured nature of the case was no secret. Historian Jeffrey P. Moran notes that everyone involved understood from the beginning that the case was a put-up job, a friendly test case designed to challenge the constitutionality of the Butler Act. Dayton's business leaders hoped the trial would bring publicity and economic benefits to their town, which had suffered economic decline. In this sense, the Scopes trial was an early example of what would now be considered a media event aimed at economic development.

The strategy worked beyond their wildest expectations: two famous figures agreed to participate. Clarence Darrow, the most prominent criminal defense attorney in the United States, volunteered to join the defense team, while Bryan, known as the "Great Commoner," joined the prosecution. Their involvement transformed what might have been a minor legal proceeding into what journalist H. L. Mencken dubbed "the monkey trial"—a national sensation and the first trial to be broadcast live on the radio.

The trial's timing coincided with the rise of mass media. Radio was still a relatively new medium. National newspaper chains were expanding, and news services could quickly transmit stories nationwide. As historian Michael Kazin writes, "the Scopes trial was a made-for-media event before such a concept existed." More than 200 newspaper reporters descended on Dayton, a town of approximately 1,800 residents. Western Union installed additional telegraph lines to handle the estimated 165,000 words being transmitted daily from the courthouse.

When the trial began on July 10, presiding judge John T. Raulston quickly narrowed its scope by ruling that scientific testimony about evolution would not be permitted. The defense had assembled an impressive array of scientific experts, including zoologist Maynard Metcalf and geologist Kirtley Mather, but they were not allowed to testify before the jury. As Larson notes, "Raulston's ruling transformed the trial from a test of the Butler Act's constitutionality to a more fundamental debate about the relationship between science and religion."

The defining moment of the trial came on its seventh day, when the defense called Bryan himself to the stand as an expert on the Bible. In an extraordinary exchange, Darrow questioned Bryan about his literal interpretation of scripture, pressing him on everything from the age of the earth to whether Jonah could have survived in the belly of a whale. The confrontation, conducted on the courthouse lawn because the judge feared the courtroom floor might collapse under the weight of the crowd, revealed the tensions within Bryan's thinking.

Though Bryan maintained his belief in the inerrancy of scripture, Darrow forced him to acknowledge that specific biblical passages might require interpretation rather than literal reading. When asked about the six days of creation, Bryan eventually conceded, "I think it would be just as easy for the kind of God we believe in to make the earth in six days as in six years or 6 million years, or 600 million years. I do not think it important whether we believe one or the other."

This apparent concession became the focus of much media coverage. Mencken, whose scathing reports in *The Baltimore Sun* shaped national perceptions of the trial, portrayed Bryan as intellectually defeated. Mencken's characterization

After the trial, a narrative emerged in the press: Scopes's conviction aside, it was fundamentalism that had been defeated. This proved premature.

of the local population as "yokels" and "morons" and his description of fundamentalism as "graveyard theology" exemplified the contemptuous attitude much of the national press held toward rural religious conservatives.

On July 21, the jury deliberated for just nine minutes before finding Scopes guilty. But Raulston fined him just $100, the minimum penalty under the law. The Tennessee Supreme Court later overturned the conviction on a technicality—the jury should have set the fine, not the judge—but the court upheld the constitutionality of the Butler Act itself.

Five days after the trial ended, Bryan died in his sleep in Dayton. His sudden death added a dramatic coda to the proceedings. According to historian Michael Lienesch, it contributed to the trial's mythic status as a symbolic battle between competing visions of America.

In the immediate aftermath of the trial, a powerful narrative emerged in the national press: Scopes's conviction aside, it was fundamentalism that had been intellectually defeated and publicly humiliated. This narrative, shaped mainly by journalists like Mencken and subsequently reinforced by popular cultural representations like the 1955 play and 1960 film *Inherit the Wind*, portrayed the trial as a decisive victory for modernity over religious obscurantism.

Frederick Lewis Allen, writing in 1931, captured this conventional wisdom when he claimed the trial "exposed the fundamental contradictions in the fundamentalist position" and suggested that after Dayton, legislators ceased to pass anti-evolution laws. Fundamentalism was still there but it had been humiliated and laughed at, and the magic had gone out of its slogans.

This narrative of fundamentalist defeat proved premature. As historian Joel Carpenter has demonstrated in his groundbreaking study *Revive Us Again*, fundamentalism did not disappear after Dayton but rather retreated from the national spotlight to build its institutional infrastructure. Rather than representing fundamentalism's demise, the Scopes trial catalyzed its transformation.

Stung by their portrayal in the national media and increasingly convinced that mainstream institutions—including public schools, universities, and Christian denominations—were hostile to their beliefs, fundamentalists began building parallel institutions. The aftermath of the Scopes trial saw the establishment or expansion of Bible institutes, Christian colleges, publishing houses, radio ministries, and mission boards independent of mainstream denominations and institutions. This institutional development represented what Marsden has called "the establishment of a fundamentalist subculture." Rather than engaging directly with mainstream culture, fundamentalists created alternative spaces where their beliefs could be taught, practiced, and transmitted to the next generation.

However, this retreat from mainstream engagement would prove temporary. The Scopes trial marked a crucial turning point in how religious conservatives understood their relationship to American public life. The perceived humiliation at Dayton contributed to a narrative of cultural displacement that would, decades later, help mobilize the religious right as a political force. The institutions established in response to that humiliation provided the organizational infrastructure for later evangelical political engagement, on issues ranging from desegregation to school prayer to abortion.

By the time Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority in 1979, he and others were explicitly linking theological

conservatism with political conservatism. Falwell, trained at Baptist Bible College, represented a direct lineage from the fundamentalist educational institutions established after the Scopes trial to the political activism of the late 20th century. As Balmer documents, the founders of the religious right frequently invoked the Scopes trial as a formative moment in their movement's history—a time when Christians had been mocked and marginalized for standing up for biblical truth. However simplified and mythologized this historical memory was, it motivated political engagement.

The creation science movement that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, led by figures like Henry Morris, with his influential book *The Genesis Flood*, directly responded to the issues raised at the Scopes trial. Rather than simply opposing the teaching of evolution, this movement sought to develop alternative scientific explanations aligned with literal readings of Genesis. This approach reflected evangelical Christians' increased educational and professional status: they now had the credentials to engage scientific questions on their own terms.

The Butler Act was repealed in 1967. But legal battles over creation science continued, culminating in the Supreme Court's *Edwards v. Aguillard* decision in 1987, which ruled that teaching creation science in public schools violated the establishment clause of the First Amendment. This echoed the constitutional questions first raised at Dayton, and these controversies would continue into the 21st century with debates over intelligent design and the appropriate place of evolutionary theory in science education.

The line from the Scopes trial to contemporary Christian nationalism reveals continuities and transformations. The fundamentalism that emerged from Dayton was primarily concerned with theological orthodoxy and cultural separation rather than political power. Contemporary Christian nationalism, by contrast, explicitly seeks to align national identity with a particular understanding of Christianity and to use political power to advance that vision.

Sociologists Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry define Christian nationalism as a cultural framework that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life such that Christianity is a defining aspect of American identity and public life. While not all religious conservatives embrace this framework, its influence extends beyond explicitly religious contexts to shape broader political discourse about American identity and purpose.

The institutions established after the Scopes trial—Bible colleges, seminaries, publishing houses, and media networks—have proven instrumental in disseminating and legitimizing Christian nationalist ideas. As historian Kristin Kobes Du Mez argues, the "parallel information ecosystem" developed by evangelicals since the 1920s has created communities largely insulated from mainstream scientific and academic consensus. This institutional separation has contributed to persistent skepticism toward scientific consensus among many religious conservatives, on issues ranging from evolution to climate change. According to sociologist Elaine Howard Ecklund, "the Scopes Trial established a template for science-religion conflict that continues to shape public discourse, even as the specific issues have evolved."

Contemporary controversies over pandemic responses, climate science, and sex education reflect the enduring impact of the science-religion divide symbolized by the Scopes trial. As historian Adam Laats observes, when we see school board battles over curriculum today, we are witnessing the latest chapter in a conflict that broke into public view at Dayton.

The relationship between fundamentalism, evangelicalism, and Christian nationalism remains complex and contested. Not all evangelicals embrace Christian nationalist ideas, and significant theological and political diversity exists within conservative Protestantism. Nevertheless, the institutional and ideological connections between the movement that emerged from Dayton and contemporary religious conservatism are substantial.

What happened in Dayton a century ago continues to reverberate through American religious, educational, and political life in ways that the trial's participants could scarcely have imagined. The trial's legacy is multifaceted and paradoxical. While typically remembered as a defeat for fundamentalism, it catalyzed the movement's institutional development and eventual political resurgence. Though framed as a decisive confrontation between science and religion, it instead inaugurated a century of evolving negotiations and conflicts between these domains. While often portrayed as a simple morality tale of progress triumphing over tradition, its legacy reveals the persistent complexity of American attitudes toward scientific knowledge and religious faith.

We continue to grapple with the questions the trial raised: about the relationship between majority rule and minority rights, between scientific expertise and religious conviction, and about whose vision of America should shape public institutions and policies. These questions have no simple resolution, which is perhaps why the trial continues to fascinate and provoke.

As we reflect on this centenary, we would do well to move beyond simplistic narratives about the trial and its aftermath. Neither the triumphalist account of science vanquishing superstition nor the reactionary portrayal of faithful believers defending tradition against godless modernism captures the complex reality of what happened at Dayton. The legacy of the Scopes trial lies not in the victory of one worldview over another but in the ongoing, often contentious, conversation about science, faith, education, and national identity we're still engaging today. ❑

**MICHAEL A. SMITH,** *a North Carolina resident, teaches history, ethics, and academic research and writing for several colleges and is author of a recent book on Christian nationalism.*

# Parable in Which No One Else in the Super 8 Breakfast Lounge Thinks About How This Hotel Might Outlive Us

by Sarah Carson

Maybe the flatbed driver shrinking into the folds
of her sweatshirt is only thinking about salting
her hard-boiled egg. It could be that the well-dressed family
checking their Google maps above the crunch of
their overcooked waffles is only thinking about
whatever important thing it is for which they have
already parted their hair, applied their moisturizers.
Surely the man eating alone in the pinched-front sombrero
has so many other things to consider, he will
not notice the nearby woman in her pajamas pants
trying to steady a plate of pastries in the crook
of her elbow, whom he has not offered to help balance
a bowl of Lucky Charms beneath the spout of the milk.
But, woe unto all of us if not for the lady coming now
through the corridor, her sleeveless tee aflutter
in the light of the vending machines. Who does
she not see as she offers to take one of the teeming
foam cups another girl attempts to maneuver around
a cleaning cart, pauses to let the girl grab
the room key from her back pocket.
If the woman is not thinking about
how much longer the planet can hold us,
then why does she bother? *What would I do*
*without you*, the girl asks, as if to say,
*What would any of us do if not*
*for the magic accident of other people?*
The woman takes the cup into the soft curve
of flesh between her thumb and forefinger,
cradles it like a bean holds a sprout head.
*You'd spill your coffee*, she says,
as if reading a fortune. An incantation
to break the curse.

**SARAH CARSON** *is author of* How to Baptize a Child in Flint, Michigan*, winner of the 2021 Lexi Rudnitsky Editors Choice Award from Persea Books.*

Invested Faith offers one possibility: give them to social entrepreneurs doing transformative work.

# Churches are closing. What should they do with their assets?

by Martin B. Copenhaver

THERE IS A POWERFUL PARADOX in American church life these days: individual churches are going broke, while collectively they control trillions of dollars.

The last comprehensive study of church closings, published in 2019, revealed that American churches were closing at the rate of 4,500 per year—almost 90 each week. Although more recent empirical data is not available, one gets the sense that this trend is only accelerating. A Hemingway character, asked how he went broke, replies, "Two ways. Gradually and then suddenly." Lately it can seem as if we have moved from the gradual part to the sudden part of what has been called "the great de-churching" of America. Churches are closing at an accelerating pace due to membership decline and its attendant financial woes.

At the same time, religious institutions in America have more in assets than Apple, Microsoft, and Google combined. Many of those assets are in the form of church buildings, which are both the source of considerable wealth and often the cause of financial strain as well. Churches also control other resources. Endowments are the most obvious, and often the largest, source of many congregations' wealth. Then there are the miscellaneous funds: special funds established for organ maintenance or cemetery care, funds held by the women's fellowship or the missionary union, funds designated for the support of ministries that are no longer active. The list could be extended almost endlessly. Some funds may be so small that they are easily overlooked. Considered together, however, they make up a story of great wealth and great potential.

Invested Faith is attempting to take advantage of this paradox. The organization, founded in 2020, connects individuals and churches who have resources—in particular, churches that are closing—with social entrepreneurs who are doing transformative work. They use contributions to offer grants to faith-rooted innovators whose fledgling enterprises work for systemic change in creative ways. Invested Faith named its first fellows (the title it gives its grantees) in 2021. There are now more than 70 fellows in 24 states and the District of Columbia.

Invested Faith fellows are engaged in a striking variety of work. Jillian Shannon runs Neotopia, a self-described "postmodern bookstore" in San Antonio, Texas, that carries only progressive theological literature. Robert Rueda founded and operates Global Blends, a "pay what you can" coffee shop and deli in Edinburg, Texas. Chris Lawrence founded El Barrio Homes, an organization in East Harlem, New York, that seeks to create affordable housing for religious and social service workers in the neighborhoods where they work.

Kit Evans-Ford founded Argrow's House in Davenport, Iowa, a home for women who are survivors of domestic abuse or

Invested Faith fellows (clockwise from upper left) Kit Evans-Ford, Robert Rueda, Aileen Maquiraya, Angela Moy, and Chelsea Spyres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## Tender Torah

by Israel Zoberman

In the Wetzlar D. P. Camp,
Germany, 1948, I, a toddler,
became a tender Torah vessel
for the minyan of survivors
who aged before their time.

My Grandpa Hirsh Zvi,
who suffered a Siberian hard-labor
camp, son of martyred Rabbi Yaakov
and Dena of Zamosc, would proudly
parade me as a Torah scroll
in his father's Polish shul, joyfully
declaring to tired but expectant ears,
"Jews, do not despair, the good God
gave us back the Torah."

They hovered over me—caressing, kissing,
blessing my soft face of a velvet
Torah cover, gratitude uttered
with clenched lips, "Not all is lost,
the Torah was returned to us."

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

sexual violence. Residents are given the opportunity to join a social enterprise associated with Argrow's House, producing a line of bath and beauty products in a safe and affirming environment while earning a living wage.

Chelsea Spyres runs the Wilmington Kitchen Collective in Wilmington, Delaware. The collective utilizes church kitchens, which often sit empty most of the week, to offer culinary entrepreneurs an affordable option for high-quality commercial kitchen facilities. Spyres reflects on this new endeavor's points of continuity with the past: "I think of how church kitchens were the hub of community meals and of outreach for that church. And we are trying to reclaim that. It can be true again, even if not in the same way. People might not be coming through the doors in the same way, but we can invite in business owners who take the food out. There is still a lot of space for community."

Some Invested Faith fellows, such as Evans-Ford and Spyres, are ordained ministers. Most are not.

Angela Moy and Aileen Maquiraya are the founders of LKE DOJO, a training program in Muay Thai, a martial art that originated in Thailand. Their dojo is unique because it caters to women and queer people, two communities that have often been excluded from participation in martial arts. Moy explains why members of these communities often respond to the ferocity of Muay Thai. "I'm finding my voice," she says, "using my body, discovering the power that has been suppressed for so long." Moy grants this irony: "The more violence you know you are capable of, the calmer you are. When you are powerful you can just rest in that and be more peaceful."

Although Moy and Maquiraya do not adhere to any particular religious tradition, their sessions begin with meditation and they see faith as central to their work. According to Moy, this can be "faith within ourselves, faith in others, in the universe, or divinity, or God." Despite that grounding, Moy is astonished that an organization with the word *faith* in its name would give them a grant.

The grants are not large—$5,000 each—but they can have an outsized impact on those leading a start-up through the early stages of development. What may be just as valuable is the recognition that comes with receiving a grant. Moy puts it this way: "We felt we were alone, hacking through a forest getting to somewhere we hope is there, what we can see in our minds but have no evidence of in the real world. So it is validating to have someone look at our work and say, 'I see the value in what you are doing.'"

Originally, the grants were seen as a way to support individual fellows in their work. Increasingly, however, those associated with Invested Faith see connecting the fellows to one another as central to their work. Becoming a fellow provides an opportunity for mutual support and a sense of shared endeavor in work that otherwise can be isolating. According

# Religious institutions in America have more in assets than Apple, Microsoft, and Google combined.

to Evans-Ford, it is "an opportunity to connect with each other's souls and to encourage each other."

Invested Faith was founded by Amy Butler, an American Baptist pastor who has served as senior minister of some of the most prominent and well-resourced congregations in the country: Calvary Baptist Church and National City Christian Church, both in Washington, DC, and the Riverside Church in New York.

The concept for Invested Faith germinated in the months after Butler's painful parting of ways with Riverside Church in 2019. Butler went to the United Kingdom for two months, in part to learn more about an organization there called Seedbeds. Started with a £9 million gift—about $12 million—Seedbeds gives grants to businesses that are addressing injustices in creative ways. At the time of Butler's visit, Seedbeds was already two decades old and had given grants to businesses throughout the UK, but it still didn't have an online presence or a formal grant application process. Their process was simple: when they saw a business in need of funds for their work forwarding the cause of justice, they gave a grant.

Butler contends that "every single social enterprise that is impacting the UK can be traced back to Seedbeds." Whether or not that assessment is strictly accurate, it is clear that the Seedbeds influence has been enormous in scope. It helped Butler see the potential for supporting social entrepreneurs in the United States.

Upon her return, Butler spent two years building the infrastructure for Invested Faith—assembling a board, launching a website, and gathering supporters. The concept was simple: Invested Faith would receive donations, largely from dying churches, providing what Butler calls "a hopeful way to invest in their future" by supporting social entrepreneurs who are working for systemic change.

Butler says that her work with congregations in the process of closing begins with some frank talk: "We can cover our eyes and hide under a pillow and ask if what we have created can sustain itself for the next 500 years—but that's not really happening. I'm just saying: You're dying. That's sad. We're people of faith who believe new life comes out of death."

She elaborates, drawing on her experience as a pastor. "What we need to move through our grief," she says, "is the reassurance, the evidence, that God is still at work. The church needs us to step up and to say there's a future, and it's hopeful, and we can go there together."

In particular, Butler sees a hopeful future in the work of faith-rooted social entrepreneurs who are doing transformational work without much institutional support. Many operate more like businesses than like religious organizations, but with this difference: they are doing some of the work associated with church—building community, feeding the hungry, protecting the vulnerable, confronting social injustice. Butler is encouraged by the variety of ways social entrepreneurs are addressing these needs. "It is going to take the efforts of all kinds of innovators to create spaces where people are finding life, hope, faith, a sense of community," she says.

Not all donations to Invested Faith come from dying churches. St. Peter's United Church of Christ in Ferguson, Missouri, has seen steep membership decline in recent years: from 250 in worship 20 years ago to more like 50 today. Nevertheless, a loyal core of parishioners and a large endowment ensure that St. Peter's will not be closing its doors in the foreseeable future. Early last year, St. Peter's gave $200,000 to Invested Faith. In September, it pledged an additional $800,000.

Patrick Chandler, the pastor of St. Peter's, admits that discussion of the gift initially created some anxiety in the congregation: "'Does this mean we're going to close?' 'What happens if we do close?' But what we do with our assets is not a question we should be asking when we are down to three people in worship." Over time, the congregation embraced the ministry

"What we need to move through our grief," says Amy Butler, "is the reassurance that God is still at work."

of Invested Faith, in part because it increased the reach of their outreach. According to Chandler, through Invested Faith, "St. Peter's continues to plant seeds of the gospel, seeds of justice, all over the country."

As post-institutional as the work of Invested Faith may seem, Butler says that she is motivated by a love for the institutional church. "I will confess to you something that not a lot of people get about me," she says. "I don't do this for the fellows. The fellows are going to find their way. For me, it's for the church—to create a compelling theological narrative for a future we can buy into. It's for congregations and for people who have lost hope. The God we follow is not a God who leaves us with an absence of hope."

Not everyone immediately embraced the concept of Invested Faith. In particular, denominations and other religious institutions were almost uniformly unsupportive. Butler recalls the frustration of those early attempts to gain the support of institutional leaders: "It's like they think I am cannibalizing churches that are dying and taking advantage of them, rather than encouraging them to get a coffee bar and a praise band."

One denominational executive—Jeffrey Haggray, the executive director of the Home Mission Society of the American Baptist Churches USA—supports Invested Faith, but he also understands why not everyone is on board with this approach to using church funds. "It is very hard to convince people to create a fund that will go directly to the support of individuals," he says. Institutions are more comfortable giving to other institutions. According to Haggray, this can lead to an ironic situation: "Sometimes when entities dissolve, they give their money to another entity that is dissolving" rather than to an individual who is doing vital work.

Haggray contends that Invested Faith's approach harkens back to an earlier time. "It's very much like in the 1800s," he says, "when we were funding missionaries who were going across America starting new entities. Some of them started seminaries, some started clinics, others started schools. They were all dealing with entrepreneurial ideas. The church had a vehicle for supporting these individuals who felt called to make a difference in the world, [a vehicle] that we don't have today. We have grown skeptical of funding impassioned individuals who will have an impact on the world. But that is what Invested Faith is doing."

One persistent question that Butler and others associated with Invested Faith have faced is whether the work of the social entrepreneurs can be described as *church*. Everyone I spoke with responded to that question by advocating a more expansive understanding of church. Chandler's reflections were echoed by others: "It is church, as long as you aren't defining church as a building that sits at the corner. As long as you have a more expansive notion of what church is. It's going to look quite different. It's going to be more grassroots, more justice-centered, because people are tired of this old institutional model we've been trying to prop up."

Butler is adamant on this same point. "Church, in my ecclesiological understanding, is a community of people gathered around a message that motivates their shared and individual living. A community that can change the world—which is what the church should be—is found in these projects."

Practical theologian Kenda Creasy Dean, drawing on a conversation with her colleague Ryan Bonfiglio, made a related point in a recent presentation to a group of pastors. "We don't know what the church of the future is going to look like," she said. "People will say, 'Yeah, it's all good what you are doing, but is it the church?' Well, when Jesus was resurrected Christ, they did not recognize him. So, what makes us think we are going to recognize the resurrected church at first?"

That may be starting to change. Lately Spyres—the fellow who founded Wilmington Kitchen Collective—has noticed a difference in how the projects supported by Invested Faith are described. "We're getting to a space," she says, "where the institution is arguing less and less over whether it is church."

Poet Wallace Stevens famously observed that we don't so much live in a place as we live in a description of a place. In recent years, the description of the place in which the church has lived has been the narrative of decline. And, to be sure, there is much raw material that can be gathered in support of that narrative. It was never a faithful narrative, however, and increasingly it has become a boring one. In its own way, Invested Faith is trying to provide a new narrative—or rather, to help us reclaim a very old one—that is centered on resurrection instead of only on death.

Mitch Randall—the CEO of Good Faith Media, which has worked with Invested Faith—frames the group's work in unapologetically theological terms. "Invested Faith is about making tangible the central affirmation of the Christian faith: we are resurrection people at our core," he says. "Our church may be dying. Nevertheless, by furthering the work of the church through justice-seeking social innovators, this is an opportunity to be born again." ❑

**MARTIN B. COPENHAVER** *is the retired president of Andover Newton Theological School and a theater critic for* The Arts Fuse.

# White Pines

by Julie L. Moore

*The tree is not coming back,* the arborist said,
thanks to the pine bark beetles that
tunneled beneath its tissue,

then gnawed upon the phloem,
a surreptitious, years-long feast
finally consumed in the end.

Last week as I mowed, circling it
& the other two white pines,
which altogether formed a diagonal

tic-tac-toe along my property line,
all seemed green & serene amid the trees.
Now they've all been sprayed.

My daughter hammocks
on the two pines that'll live,
records herself swinging in the snap-

pea polyester, shows me the footage.
Above her face the long, soft needles
sway in the July sky dappled

with the kind of clouds we've come
to expect in this season, innocuous
in the morning but bulbous,

building, if the forecast can be trusted,
ever slowly toward afternoon storm.

*A sudden death,* I say to the tree feller
who arrives a few days later to estimate

the cost of removal. His face is swathed
in scar from a house fire long ago,

the price of attempted rescue.
He says he calls my pastor

from time to time when he is
low. Says it helps. He will hew

the limbs, cut the trunk to the quick,
down to the ground. Then send in

the stump grinder. He knows no easy
remedy for loss but tells me to toss

grass seed over the top, *so by next year,*
*no one will ever know it was there.*

**JULIE L. MOORE** *is author of* Full Worm Moon*, which won a 2018 Woodrow Hall Top Shelf Award.*

A new database of more than 900 biblical translations presents a prism of cultures, languages, and meanings.

# What do we mean when we say something is "in the Bible"?

by Jost Zetzsche

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's classic novella *The Little Prince* has been translated into more than 600 languages and dialects, more than any other nonreligious work in history. Translation of this magnitude is truly a mind-blowing feat, a powerful and ever-growing monument to this beloved story of friendship, love, and seeing with the heart.

My own experience with Bible translation makes me wonder whether the English readers of *The Little Prince*, the Basque readers of the *Printze txikia*, and the Zulu readers of the *Inkosana Encane* are all reading the book in the same manner. Do they approach this book as an original book in their own language, or do they recognize its universal themes packaged into a World War II French pilot's semi-autobiographical tale that was then successfully translated into their language? In other words, how do we view this text as we read it?

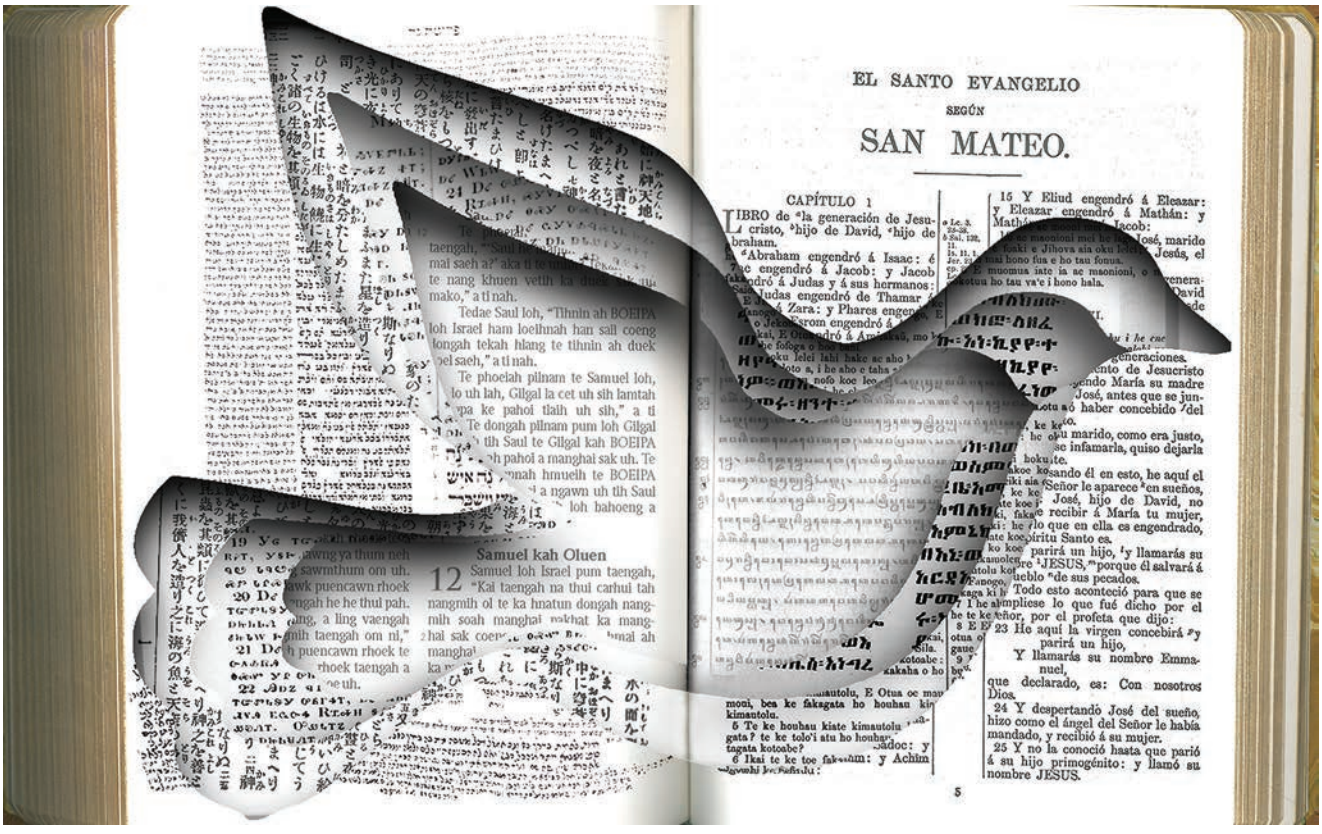
There are seven different translations of *Le Petit Prince* into English, but of course most readers are not going to go back and compare their favorite translation with the French original in detail. We just don't read most literature like that. Instead, readers love the story and yearn for its message: deeper relationships that allow us to see things that are "invisible to the eyes."

But with the Bible, the stakes go up. When we say that something is "in the Bible," what do we mean? Is it the exact translated text? Or the original Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic text that we assume is well represented in the translated text? Or maybe it's no specific text at all but more of an idea of "the message of the Bible"?

In the 1973 translation of the Psalms by the Jewish Publication Society, the preface acknowledges a problem that resonates with most biblical translators: "For many passages, our as yet imperfect understanding of the language of the Bible or what appears to be some disorder in the Hebrew text makes sure translation impossible." The translators of the Swedish *Bibel 2000* declared 69 Old Testament verses to be untranslatable and accordingly declined to translate them. In addition to the problem of not understanding the languages in which the Bible was written, Bible translators also face the reality that multiple manuscripts contain different versions of a single text, and sometimes there are disagreements as to which one is authoritative.

This presents a very different scenario from *The Little Prince*. The Bible (at least parts of it) has been translated into vastly more languages (about 3,500) and multiple times over in many of those languages (about 900 times in English alone). The source text of *The Little Prince* is completely static. No one questions its authenticity; in fact, the original French manuscript is still in existence.

Likewise, the language used by Saint-Exupéry is current enough that it remains completely accessible for those who read and understand modern French. Contrast that with the




languages of the Bible, which no one speaks today. Many have studied them, of course, but no one knows them as living languages and can evaluate them as such.

Given this reality, can a text made up of so many nonprimary manuscripts in ancient languages function as an authoritative text in the same way that Saint-Exupéry's text is authoritative to its many translations?

One thing we do have access to in the contemporary moment is a recognition of the multiplicity of both source and translation. This is a great gift, if we are to follow Paul in seeking "words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:13). According to Paul, understanding God's word, scripture, is not possible without the Spirit of God's Word, Jesus.

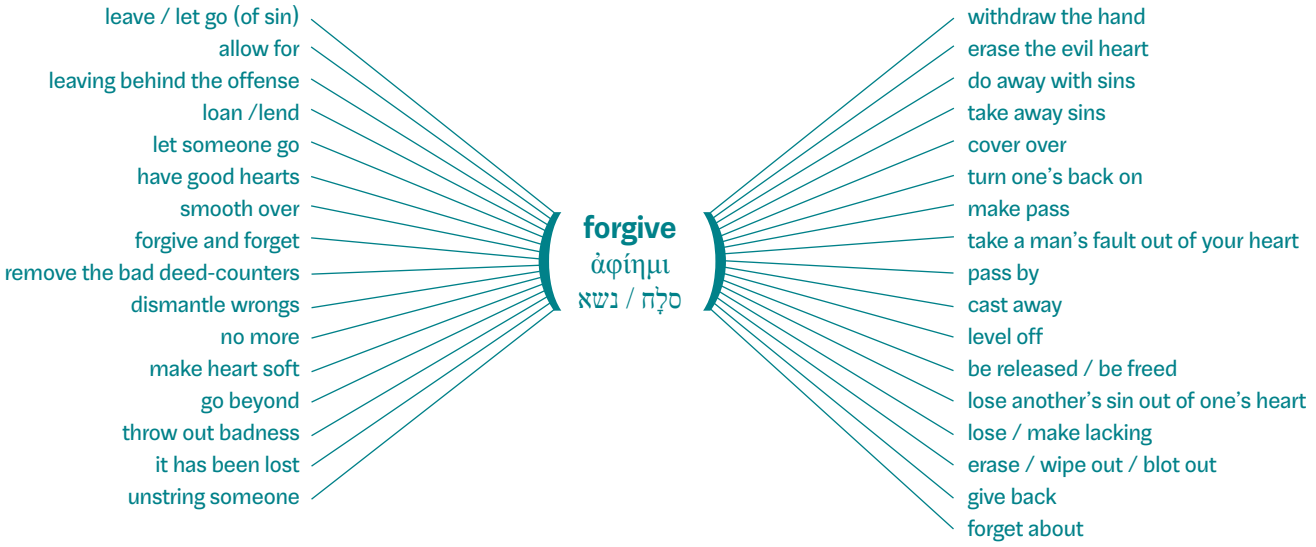
It's easy to be impressed by the fancy charts that display the ever-growing number of languages in which Bible translations are being published, or the number of languages that are being worked on at any point in time. But it's something altogether more profound to look behind that amazing, hyper-multilingual effort of the past, present, and future. Every time a part of scripture is translated and people in that language begin to read and use that translation, Christians meet God in a new language, through a new cultural mindset, in a new way.

Despite all of this almost overwhelming multiplicity, it is fascinating that the Bible translation movement is less fragmented than the rest of the church. A very large percentage of Bible translators, no matter what organization they are associated with or what confession they are part of, use the same rich set of tools—tools that give them access to the latest in scholarship and resources and equip them with ways to communicate with each other and, ultimately, with us.

Until a few years ago, I was mostly unaware of this relative cohesion of the Bible translation movement. While my academic work was on the history of Bible translation, since then I had worked as a technical translator. That's a strange combination of experiences, but it helped me understand something important about translation in general and Bible translation in particular: like all translators, I discovered that a "perfect" translation is not possible. Complete and linear transfer of form and meaning between two languages is not achievable, no matter how closely those languages might be related. There is always something lost in translation.

But successful translation is still possible, because much can be gained in translation as well. Since linear and complete transfer from one language to another is unattainable, translators try to generate a text that becomes equivalent in its expressive force and meaning by transformation—by introducing, inevitably, changed elements and new ones.

CENTURY ILLUSTRATION




After a lifetime of pondering the power and limitations of translation, I began to ask myself what implications this transformative process has for our understanding of the Bible. What if I could build a database to document those changed and new elements that have made their way into some—and maybe eventually all—of the languages into which the Bible has been translated? What if I could collect insightful terms, phrases, and constructs—and then go a step further to associate each with an explanation or a story or a translation into English, so that they were accessible to people who didn't speak those languages? What if we could see the rich collection of translation materials in one place?

The result of this dream, under the auspices of United Bible Societies, is an online database called Translation Insights and Perspectives, at tips.translation.bible. This project is far from finished; in fact, it's designed to be an ongoing work in progress. It will probably never be finished. Still, it already has a very large amount of data. There are more than 50,000 individual records, some of which have translations in dozens of the more than 900 languages that we have been able to collect data from at this point.

The idea behind it is both unique and head-spinning: an introduction for Christians (or really anyone) around the world into new and ongoing conversations with God. It includes the gospel in many of the more than 400 sign languages, as well as the gospel recited by individuals wearing the traditional garb of their people and singing the music of their own places. We hear the gospel told through dance, storytelling, and visual art, as well as, of course, the printed and digitally accessible written word. In each iteration, something truly new is translated. A new facet of what we can know about God becomes brighter.

Consider what this looks like in a specific example. Forgiveness plays a central role in human life, and it is a central concept in Christianity. But it is not a concept that is understood exactly the same way across languages and cultures. Over the course of curating data for TIPs, I've encountered many insightful ways of approaching and translating the concept of forgiveness that have challenged my own perceptions.

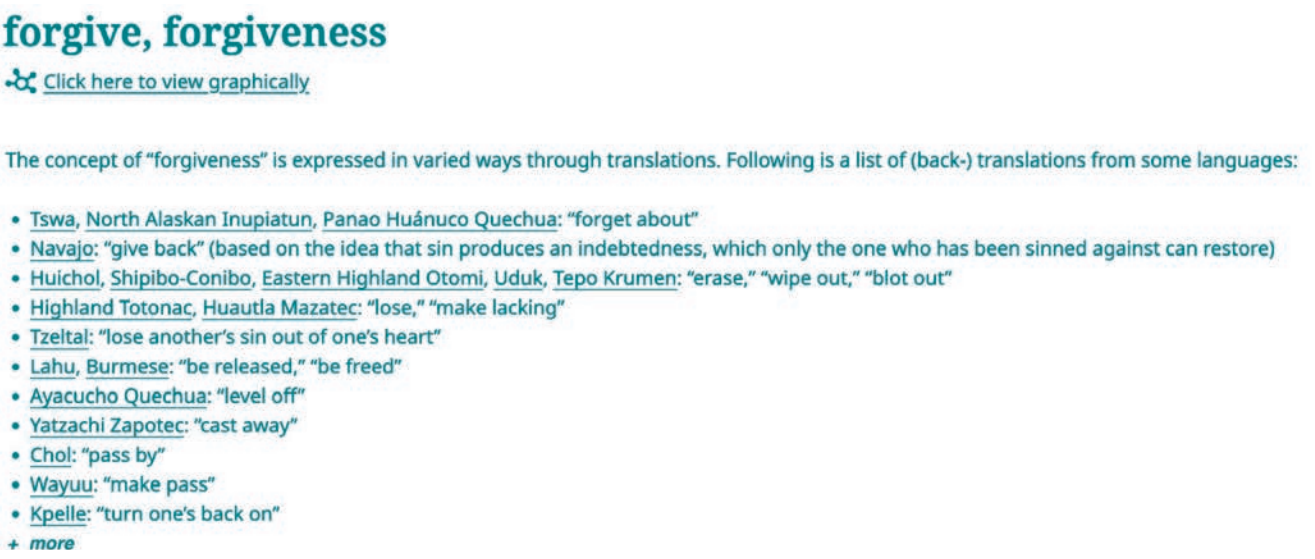
One is the translation of *forgiveness* into Ngbaka, spoken by approximately one million people in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Here two terms can be used for *forgive*: ɛlɛ means "forgive and forget"; mbɔkɔ means "to excuse something." Translators first used ɛlɛ when rendering the Bible in Ngbaka, but this was eventually aborted because the native translation team felt that people might well forgive but, unlike God, can't forget. (See my Sunday's Coming post for the CENTURY from August 18, 2023.)

Each language team in all of the world's languages must grapple with similar complexities as they try to convey the most basic meaning of forgiveness, both God's and ours. TIPs offers a graphical overview that summarizes the more detailed entries on *forgive* in many languages both familiar and unfamiliar (see above). Each of these translations in TIPs has a corresponding entry with information about the location and culture of the language group and its translation into English. Many entries also have additional details about the context and discovery of the term.

This prismatic picture of the meaning of forgiveness never fails to challenge and broaden my idea of what forgiveness entails. None of these translations captures the concept completely. Nor does the English word *forgive*, which etymologically means "to give completely." But taken together, they perhaps come closer to a perfect translation than any one of them on its own.

In the TIPs database, one way to access this data is by entering a book and verse. Then you can see the original text, a reference translation, and various records associated with different languages (see next page).

Each language evolved to suit the needs of its users. But each language is also limited by the constraints of its users and their traditions. This holds true for modern languages—those




spoken widely as well as those struggling to survive—and it's also true for ancient languages, including the original languages of biblical texts.

Modern English speakers, for instance, typically associate the terms *heaven* and *sky* with two different concepts. Biblical Hebrew and Greek speakers each had only one word here. Since English speakers (along with those of many other languages) make a distinction between a physical sky and a spiritual heaven that the original languages do not, you could argue that these languages have a leg up. Or you could argue that it makes the job of translators much harder, as the vast majority still translate "heaven and earth will pass away" in the synoptic gospels (Matt. 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33) when technically it should be "sky and earth will pass away."

The 40,000 speakers of Highland Tzeltal in southern Mexico do not have more than one word for "wisdom," but they make interesting distinctions that illuminate the word in English as well as in Tzeltal. When the language team translated the book of Proverbs, they variously used *p'ijil-o'tanil* for "heart wisdom," *p'ijil c'op* for "word wisdom" (also used for "knowledge"), and *p'ijil jol* for "head wisdom" (also used for "insight" or "understanding") for the single Hebrew term in the original text. Highland Tzeltal speakers explore both "heart wisdom" and "head wisdom" in Proverbs 9:10: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of heart wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is head wisdom." In Proverbs 1:7, Tzeltal speakers can compare head wisdom with word wisdom: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of head wisdom; fools despise word wisdom and instruction."

Now when I see the English word *wisdom* (or the Hebrew חָכְמָה) in my Bible reading, I'm deeply thankful for the more granular view Highland Tzeltal has given me, and I wonder how I ever managed to get by without differentiating between the wisdom that can be communicated and studied, the wisdom that presents the accumulation of what has been acquired, and wisdom that points to the spiritual world. (Perhaps *p'ijil-o'tanil*, "heart wisdom," has much in common with *The Little Prince*'s "seeing with the heart.")

The goal of TIPs is not to change or amend the text of the Bible; instead, the translations serve as a scriptural prism to reveal the many-colored details that are otherwise impossible to view. The original text of scripture in our various confessions is finite, but the enormous corpus of its translation into the world's languages is ever growing.

As English readers, we are privileged to have a plethora of English translations to choose from, many of which are translated with the highest level of scholarship and intellectual honesty. Using several of those translations in our own Bible reading already serves as a prism to reveal additional colors. Beyond those resources, however, we can also have access to hundreds of other languages and their own journeys with scripture. It's not that access in one language is not enough. But why not enjoy the fullest available spectrum of God's colorful word?

This returns us to an earlier question: What do we mean when we say that something is "in the Bible"? "We do not need to hear Jesus in Aramaic," writes Catholic scholar Paul Griffith. "We need to hear him in our multitude of mother tongues. . . . The meanings of all versions taken together constitute the meaning of the canon of Scripture."

The church reads the Bible in translation, and it is those translations that—according to Paul, with the help of the Holy Spirit—equip and help to form the church. We live in an age in which we have access to unique data, including in languages we don't speak or read. Let's use it.

Christians who read Tagbanwa, a language in the Philippines spoken by just a few hundred people, have this assurance in their translation of Hebrews 4:12, translated back into English: "As for the word of God, it is no joking-matter. It can do much." ❑

**JOST ZETZSCHE** *is a contractor with United Bible Societies and curator of tips.translation.bible.*

While my thinking on this question has shifted, at the core of my being there is still a well-dressed girl from Queens.

# Does God care what I wear to church?

by Pamela A. Lewis

A FEW YEARS AGO, I stopped dressing up for church. Until then my typical Sunday outfit consisted of either one of my better dresses or a skirt suit, stockings (even on the hottest summer days), and shoes with the kind of heels that noisily announced my approach. I chose my accessories carefully, good but not ostentatiously outsized jewelry, a small handbag of which Queen Elizabeth II might have approved—and which contained an embroidered handkerchief. Regardless of how low the temperatures dipped or how soaking the rains were, I never wore pants to church. In the 1950s, '60s, and '70s, that was the ultimate transgression no God-fearing, upstanding woman dared commit, lest she risk being cast into outer darkness.

I was born and lived my first 13 years in the Jamaica section of Queens, New York, where my British Guyanese immigrant parents and I attended the neighborhood Methodist church. Although it was not part of what is known as the Black church, where the term "Sunday best" is taken very seriously and women's elaborate hats are referred to as crowns, nonetheless I was surrounded by African American men, women, and children who observed the prescribed dress code of mid-century America: suits and ties for men, dresses for women. We dressed up for church because we were going to spend a few hours in God's house, the most important house. Church was different, serious, and special; it was not the workplace or school, and it was not a recreational place, such as a park or the beach. It was a place where respectful attire and behavior were required and expected. As Black people, it was also important to us to dress well on Sundays because our dress communicated how we wanted and needed to see ourselves—as dignified human beings who cared about our outward appearance.

In the early 1980s, we moved to another part of Queens, much closer to Manhattan, where I worked at the Museum of Modern Art. I began attending the midday service at one of the city's prominent Episcopal churches during my lunch break. This eventually led to catechism classes, followed by confirmation.

A jewel of French High Gothic architecture, my church is both imposing and inviting. While the iconography tells the story of the Christian faith in exquisitely carved wood and stone and glorious stained glass beneath soaring vaulted ceilings, side chapels offer quietude for those who seek it. The liturgy is unapologetically formal, with vestments, scripture readings from the King James Version, and an all-male choir reaching back to a 900-year-old choral tradition. In a city, a country, and a world marked by constant and rapid change, my church continues to offer a worship experience that is comfortingly—or, some would argue, stubbornly—immutable. I was drawn to these traditional features, and they have kept their hold on me and other parishioners.

Though there was no heavy brocade, I noted in my early years of attendance that the congregation's attire was also formal. Men wore dark suits and conservatively patterned ties

Concrete Wish, *by Kaye Lee Patton*

## After the pandemic, I wondered if there was even a point to getting dressed up anymore.

(with a few sporting more dandyish bow ties), and women wore dresses or tailored suits, accented with tasteful jewelry, carefully constructed leather handbags, and top label shoes (think Ferragamo and Gucci). Only the men wore pants. The usher board, still exclusively male in the early 1980s, also wore dark suits and, on special feast days, traditional morning dress: cutaway jackets paired with subtly pinstriped trousers. In summer, they wore seersucker suits until Labor Day.

I had joined a church community that in some significant ways was different from what I had known in my early youth, but there was very little difference insofar as attire was concerned. The message was the same, and it was clear: The church—especially *this* church—is special, and we should dress in a manner that reflects that understanding. If there was any departure from that unwritten yet commonly accepted rule, you found yourself on the receiving end of disapproving looks, or perhaps even taken aside by a longstanding member to hear some words of guidance.

Meanwhile, anyone paying attention would have noticed that American culture was becoming increasingly informal in attire and behavior. I was aware of the sartorial shift, particularly when I attended the theater to see plays, the ballet, or classical music performances. As someone who had always liked nice clothes and enjoyed dressing up for special occasions, I felt unhappy and frustrated by what I was witnessing and questioned why people—especially women—were becoming not just more casual but careless, as I saw it, in their self-presentation. The change was ubiquitous, and I began to wonder what the point was to dressing nicely at all.

For a time the church remained the last bastion of what I saw as appropriate attire. But casual dress gradually reached my congregation too. Over time there were fewer suit-wearing men in the pews and a decline in dresses or skirts on women. More women wore pants to church, regardless of the weather. Our society's growing awareness of and grappling with economic inequities, both revealed and exacerbated by the COVID pandemic, further influenced declining standards for dress. Jokes about stay-at-home employees in sweats notwithstanding, the pandemic raised casual attire to a new level and all but eradicated more formal clothing. There was suddenly no need to dress up for anything.

Despite my misgivings, I too began opting more for comfort than for style, along with wearing less jewelry than had been my custom. I wore pants when serving on the altar guild, in the interest of practicality. No one raised an objection. I began to wonder: Does God care about how I—and we—dress for church?

This question is complex, as are all questions about what matters to God where human beings are concerned. It delves into the intersection of spirituality, morality, and personal expression. Clothing is a powerful outward manifestation of personal identity and cultural norms and a signifier of social and economic status. When considering divine interest regarding my attire, however, I turn to scriptural and philosophical perspectives to understand the broader implications.

Each of the Abrahamic traditions offers perspectives on the significance of clothing. While it is not my intention to focus on modesty, this is often raised as an issue within the context of attire. The Qur'an instructs both men and women to dress modestly and to maintain decency, reflecting inner piety and respect (Surah An-Nur 24:30–31). In Judaism, the Torah contains specific laws regarding clothing, such as the prohibition of wearing garments of mixed fabrics (Deut. 22:11) and the importance of tzitzit (fringes) on the garments of observant Jews (Num. 15:38–39). Such regulations are reminders to the community of their religious duties and identity, connecting attire to spiritual practice rather than to aesthetic choices.

In the story of David's selection as Israel's king, God says, "Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature: for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the

outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7, all quotations KJV). While this passage speaks to physical appearance, it might be extended to refer to clothing as well.

The New Testament echoes this theme. Jesus repeatedly points to the "kingdom," where exterior earthly values such as wealth, power, and status have no place, a truth powerfully revealed in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus instructs his listeners to pay closer attention to what is essential and to place their trust in God, who will provide for them as he does for the "lilies of the field," which, though not grandly attired, surpass the glorious raiment of Solomon. The lilies are neither concerned about their appearance, nor do they labor to maintain it. In seeking first the kingdom of God, we will not worry about food, drink, or what to wear (Matt. 6:25–34). God knows, Jesus explains, that we are preoccupied with such concerns, which is why we need to look to the natural world as our example. Whenever I peer into my well-stocked closet and lament, "I have nothing to wear!" I am brought up short by these verses from Matthew's Gospel. I realize just how far I am from the lilies.

Clothing also appears in the book of James, where the writer tells of a rich man who, wearing a gold ring and in "goodly apparel," is well received and given the best seat, while a poor man in "vile raiment" is made to sit under the footstool (James 2:1–4). Those few verses tell us nothing about the quality of either man's heart, only that they are treated by others according to their apparel.

The question as to whether God cares about what we wear isn't trivial; it may be seen as a reflection of larger debates about the nature of divine concern. While we believe that God cares about all of creation and particularly about human beings made in God's image, we must remind ourselves that God is not like us and thereby does not care about things in the same way that we do. If God is a being concerned with the moral and ethical dimensions of human life, then the specific details of attire, such as brand names or stylishness, will be less significant than whether the clothing reflects values and attitudes that align with God's divine principles and teachings. To this we must acknowledge the reality of divine jealousy, whereby God wants to be above all else when it comes to being in relationship with us.

T. S. Eliot's long poem *Ash Wednesday*, which he wrote in 1927 during his conversion to Anglicanism, deals with the struggle that ensues when the individual who has lacked faith in the past strives to move toward God. One of its oft-cited couplets, "Teach us to care and not to care / Teach us to sit still," is the poetic persona's prayer as well as ours. But it is not God's prayer. God already knows how to care and not to care. We must be taught how to care about the people, places, things, and events in our lives and to achieve a balance in our caring. God cares how we use what we have, including our clothing, vis-à-vis our fellow human beings. If we are, for instance, people of means who can afford expensive clothes, do we dress to impress others and flaunt our wealth, or do we dress to express respect and reverence for God?

Ultimately, the question of whether God cares about what we wear in church cannot be answered definitively; God's mind is too vast and unknowable. And shifting norms for secular and church attire can send important messages about inclusivity and accessibility. But I still want to dress up for church. When we have a choice, our choice of clothes can convey our attitudes, our personal beliefs, and our sense of self. Once we have buttoned or zipped ourselves into them, the meanings we assign our clothes can even help us to navigate our interpersonal and professional milieus. I continue to think we shouldn't deliberately present ourselves sloppily dressed in God's house, but I also believe that when the last trumpet blows, we will not be judged for how we dressed. God will judge us according to how much we sought first the kingdom and considered the lilies.

Still, despite the shift in my thinking about dressing up, I want to keep that well-dressed little girl in Queens at the core of my being. That little girl who looked forward to joyfully donning a special dress paired with a chic handbag and black patent leather shoes I had selected myself. That act was my entrée into adulthood—into my womanhood. It was how I learned about what to wear and when to wear it. In those early years, I became part of a community of carefully turned-out young girls who exuded good taste that was never fussy.

Now, on summer days, one of my favorite outfits to wear to church is a pale yellow, A-line, sleeveless dress with a Peter Pan collar and pockets. It hits the knee just at the right spot. I complete the look with dark blue flats and a matching shoulder bag. On my right wrist I wear a blue cloisonné bangle. Small pearl earrings adorn my earlobes. I bring along a lightweight shawl to stave off the over-aggressive air-conditioning. It is a timeless look, comfortable, subtly in style—church lady suitable. I like to think that the Lord approves. ❑

**PAMELA A. LEWIS** *is a writer and a member of St. Thomas Church in New York City.*

# Books

"Surprise! The kingdom is among us, and we didn't know it until the preacher told us a story."

—Will Willimon, *page 83*

**Discussed in this issue**

**Helen Boursier**'s exploration of the faith lives of migrants

**Tom Long**'s homiletical guide to the parables of Jesus

**Joel Edward Goza**'s study of the ways legislation has helped racism thrive in the US

**Carlos Moreno**'s and **Anna Letitia Zivarts**'s visions of city life without cars

**Adam Kirsch**'s plea for a more precise understanding of settler colonialism

**Richard Price**'s novel about a man who rises from the rubble

**Theresa Monteiro**'s collection of revelatory poems

# Ecclesiastes and the heart-wrenching lives of migrants

Helen Boursier explores spirituality before, during, and after people decide to cross into the United States.

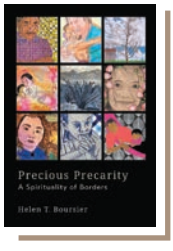
by M. C. Lohrmann

**The most disheartening tendency of theology** is its imitation of Moses at Mt. Sinai, hurrying edicts from on high down to the poor sods below. Belittling at best, theology as such looks less like reality than like the sacred cow it condemns. More and more these days, I find myself hungry for conversation partners who lift theological discourse to the experience of human dignity, who dare to run uphill toward the cloudy mountaintops with life's messiness in tow, full of wonder, graciousness, and tears.

It was with this kind of hunger that I picked up Helen Boursier's *Precious Precarity: A Spirituality of Borders*. I'm the pastor of a congregation 30 minutes from one of the world's busiest pedestrian border crossings, a clergyperson who is involved in civil disobedience at the border and theological witness to its continued militarization, and a preacher in a community that includes many Border Patrol and ICE agents. So I hoped that I may be Boursier's primary audience. As it turns out, I needed this book even more than I realized, a fact that both troubles and inspires me.

Boursier aims her discourse at faith leaders who find themselves unwillingly steeped in a stew of confusion, hatred, xenophobia, punditry, and bad policy. Her previous book, *Willful Ignorance: Overcoming the Limitations of (Christian) Love for Refugees Seeking Asylum*, used ethnography and social analysis to reveal the ambivalence of faith leaders toward border concerns. For this work, Boursier changes tack, running her theological project up the mountaintop, tears in tow.

By taking the spiritual lives of migrants as the starting point for her examination, Boursier lifts the forgotten fleshiness of their experience into the realm of humanity. She accomplishes this by exploring the manifold spiritualities of migrants' lives before, during, and after their decision to cross into the United States. Along the way, Boursier enfleshes her subjects as ends in themselves, employing Ecclesiastes as a scriptural guide through the heart-wrenching lives of migrants.




**Precious Precarity: A Spirituality of Borders**

By Helen T. Boursier (Fortress Press)

Boursier reveals Qohelet to be an excellent guide through migrants' experiences, from cynicism and dissent to paradox, risk, and even joy. These themes, among others, emerge not only from the biblical text but from within the migrant experience. At the intersection of Ecclesiastes's reflections on divine justice and the cries of the real subjects Boursier studies, she writes, "Ecclesiastes, and many of the [migrant] families, steadfastly affirms that God is in control, even though it's impossible to know who, what, when, where, or how God will ultimately dispense justice, paralleling a spirituality of borders that also trusts the ultimate *justness of God*."

Lest her readers forget the stakes, Boursier reminds us that spirituality at the borderlands isn't limited to migrant families. She notes that "many of the volunteers and advocates affirm belief in God, not necessarily a churchy or religious god but a Supreme Something that imbues a moral calling to justice." My own experiences of borderland advocacy have been filled with passionate, post-Christian activists. The implication is clear: Faithful people aren't leaving God, but they are leaving the church because it doesn't feel faithful. Faith leaders ignore borderland issues at their own peril.

Occasionally I found myself hoping that Boursier's examination might go deeper still. The borderlands, as I have come to understand them, are not a uniform story of migration. In my context of the San Diego area, for example, more than 150,000 people cross the border each workday, mostly from Mexico to the United States for work. Borderland people often cross in the other direction as well, as high housing costs in Southern California drive US citizens south for less expensive housing. I am curious about how Boursier might examine the spiritual

complexity of everyday indignities and injustices experienced by these people at the border. Similarly, I wonder about the widespread occurrence, which I've both frequently witnessed and personally experienced, of burnout among activists in the borderlands, as well as the spiritual ramifications of whole communities of well-meaning church folks walking away from such projects, constantly exhausted by the senseless violence witnessed there.

These quibbles, however, are far less than enough to warrant any dismissal of Boursier's project. I have already spoken to my bishop and other church-based activists about using her work as a guide for exploring our local context and mutual activism, which is as high praise as I can give.

From my perspective as a member of Boursier's intended audience—an accidentally hard-hearted American preacher in the mythical soupiness of borderland realities—*Precious Precarity* accomplishes its aims and then some.

*Boursier seeks to accomplish in the hearts of her readers what our swollen intuitions of right and wrong cannot.*

The book's blows to my protective distance from the border and its misery are relentless. There are moments in the writing when one can detect the kind of philosophical distance we might expect of academic work, deploying critical tools for the purposes of abstraction and evaluation. Yet there are other moments when the pain of the subject breaks through, and we glimpse Boursier's own heart as a witness to the crucified in our backyard.

Months ago, a group of church leaders from my denomination gathered near the Tijuana border crossing in San Diego County to discuss consolidating our ministries there. We had invited a consultant to help us articulate a set of manageable, mutually held aims around shared border activism. In the room were pastors who preside over eucharistic services at the Border Church (see "Worship through a wall," April 22, 2020), volunteers who regularly drive asylum seekers from the border to the airport, folks who make weekly lunches for migrants as they pass through the region to safety, activists who drop jugs of water in the desert on secretive backpacking trips, church leaders who host refugee families in church basements, and more.

At one point, the consultant paused to ask, "So, what do we call these people you all want to help? Migrants? Asylum seekers? Border crossers? Refugees? *Illegals*?" We all froze in a moment of confusion, stalled by the mystifying depths of international law, US immigration policy, punditry, and politicization.

Someone finally chimed in to say, "beloved children of God?" Shame crept over the room as we recognized that despite our best efforts, none of us had considered that name as a possibility.

In examining migrants' spiritual lives and displaying rich stories of abiding faithfulness in the face of incredible trauma, Boursier seeks to accomplish in the hearts of her audience what our swollen intuitions of right and wrong cannot. In Boursier's telling, the borderlands function not only as a site of examination but also as one for redemption, that is, our redemption. ❑

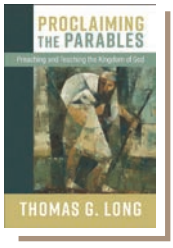
**M. C. LOHRMANN** *is pastor of Shepherd of the Valley Lutheran Church in La Mesa, California, and author of* Ptoxocracy: An End to Christianity.

# The kingdom of God is like *this*

Tom Long's invigorating new book empowers preachers to preach on and with the parables of Jesus.

by Will Willimon

**In *Resident Aliens*, Stanley Hauerwas** and I warned that seminary biblical courses sometimes disempower budding preachers: *See? You'll never have the linguistic, analytical, or historical skills to preach a biblical sermon.* In contrast, Thomas Long has written a voluminous, sweeping, occasionally even thrilling book that will empower preachers to preach on and with the parables of Jesus. Along the way, he schools a few biblical scholars.




**Proclaiming the Parables: Preaching and Teaching the Kingdom of God**

By Thomas G. Long (Westminster John Knox)

Over four decades, at a half dozen seminaries, Long taught his legendary course on preaching the parables. This was a momentous period for parables research. Dan Otto Via, John Dominic Crossan, Klyne Snodgrass, R. Alan Culpepper, John Stott, and many other scholars shoved parables front and center, mining them as the distinctive element of Jesus' teaching and preaching. Long has read all of their books, it seems. Preachers will love his astute distillation of these scholars' findings, as well as his occasional mocking of their vaunted discoveries.

Long taught that parables could be sly, explosive, disruptive, and mind-grabbing. But he had to admit that most of his students' sermons on the parables were just . . . well, sermons. Then he received a revelation. When Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is like *this*," it's not just a rhetorical device. With those words, a theological event is taking place. Long puts it this way: "The purpose of parables is not merely to *talk about* the kingdom of God but instead to take us to those places all around us where the inbreaking of God's kingdom can be perceived and *experienced*."

Long's discovery led to a fresh awareness: the power of parables is "the kingdom of God to which they refer." Parables do more than talk about God's kingdom; they also instigate it. They're not just stories about God; they're from God. In Jesus' parables, God answers our "thy kingdom come" prayers, albeit with unexpected people and places. Long quotes Austin Farrer: "Christ does not save us by acting a parable of divine love; he acts the parable of divine love by saving us. That is the Christian faith."

*Proclaiming the Parables* is both an invigorating homiletical textbook and a groundbreaking biblical commentary. As in his preaching, Long's witty parabolic asides make for fun reading—and some long overdue puncturing of the biblical guild's pretensions. For over a century since Adolf Jülicher, scholars have savored the rhetorical impact of parables: Allegory? Simile? Metaphor? Joke? Let's all stand back and marvel at how the literary gears and levers of parables do their extraordinary intellectual work. Not good enough, says Long, noting that Jülicher's "suspiciously non-Jewish" Jesus sounds "more like a nineteenth-century German professor" than a first-century rabbi.

Long compares C. H. Dodd's influential characterization of parables as clever thought teasers to a sports car of the 1950s: cute and snazzy, but an unreliable means for getting a preacher home. He accuses Robert Funk and other members of the Jesus Seminar of hyperbolic excess in their praise of parables as literary shock and awe:

> If someone were to run on stage at the Super Bowl halftime show, steal the mic from, say, Eminem or Snoop Dog or Rihanna, and, before security muscled them off, were to recite to the startled crowd one of Jesus' parables, maybe the Mustard Bush or the Seed Growing Secretly, the crowd would probably be confused, perhaps intrigued, but would almost surely not experience mythical shock, transformation, a loss of control, and their lives being torn apart.

As for William Herzog's invigorating, liberatory, revolutionary Marxist take on the parables, Long suspects it is but the most recent attempt to make the parables talk like us in ways we want to hear, only faintly resembling the Jesus of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. "We are called to be 'on hand' for God's kingdom, which is always 'at hand,' but is never in our little hands to claim as territory, even in Oklahoma," smirks Long.

My takeaway from this book is that you don't need to be a preacher to understand and experience Jesus' parables fully, but preaching helps. Parables preach. They want to do something to those who hear them: break out the kingdom. The seed that mysteriously sprouts, the yeast that rises a ridiculously large

lump of dough, the extravagant party thrown for the homecoming of a wayward child, the wounded victim saved by the wrong person. Surprise! The kingdom is among us, and we didn't know it until the preacher told us a story. One moment you're listening to a strange little tale about God's invasion; next thing you know, you're part of it. Long puts it this way: "The main power of parables is in their capacity to point to what God is doing in the world, that is, to the kingdom of God. The power is not in the trope, but in the referent."

A warning for preachers: Reading *Proclaiming the Parables* will take a while. Every biblical parable is present and accounted for. Long takes each text—obediently and playfully—and summons a wide range of illustrations, unexpected connections, and startling examples. He listens to one of Jesus' stories and then thinks of Tennessee Williams, Flannery O'Connor, *The New Yorker*, or Morna Hooker. Long's introductory framing of Matthew's parables is the best you'll find. His exposition and homiletical presentation of the parable of the wicked tenants is unparalleled. Never again will you preach the mustard seed as you've preached it before. On almost every one of these 400-plus pages, you'll be pausing to jot down notes for a sermon, the realm of God breaking out as you read a book about it.

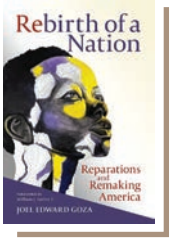
Time and again, Long exemplifies what he is talking about, demonstrating that parables are meant not only to be preached but also to preach. "Our task is not to explain the parables but to proclaim them," he writes. "We allow the parable to disclose where God is at work in the world, and with amazement we are privileged to announce this event." Here's an outstanding book to help preachers do just that. ❑

**WILL WILLIMON** *teaches at Duke Divinity School and is author of* Changing My Mind: The Overlooked Virtue for Faithful Ministry.

# Racism by law

Joel Edward Goza shows how White supremacy has used legislation to structure the social reality of the United States.

by Jeannine Hill Fletcher




**Rebirth of a Nation: Reparations and Remaking America**

By Joel Edward Goza (Eerdmans)

**Joel Edward Goza's new book** is an exceptional contribution to the growing genre of anti-racist histories. While it necessarily traverses some familiar pathways, the level of depth achieved in this concentrated detailing of key figures demonstrates undeniably how the ideology of White supremacy has been baked into our national culture. Simultaneously, Goza's unique legislative focus allows readers to experience more fully how past projects continue to create the context for present realities. Ultimately this book provides a North Star toward a better future, highlighting the need for repentance and repair—and beginning the work.

Because the genre of anti-racist history has been expanding in the last decade, perhaps by now we all know something of the inherited lies we need to unlearn. Goza facilitates this unlearning by charting White supremacy's insidiousness in popular culture and showing how it has structured the social reality of the United States through each generation's legislation. To do this work, Goza frames his examination around key White male power brokers—in popular culture and in politics—and dives deeply into both their intimate logic and their expansive reach. Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Dixon (author of *The Clansman*), Madison Grant (architect for eugenics), and Ronald Reagan provide the pillars for understanding the cultural scene of White supremacy and the creation of its legislative house which we continue to inhabit today.

We see anew not only Jefferson's personal entanglement in the project of slavery but his contribution to US culture's enduring anti-Blackness. Similarly, by detailing Lincoln's lesser known "Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction," Goza expands our understanding of this complex figure who "appeased the Southern power structure even at the expense of Black dignity." Demonstrating how White supremacy was the "broken bedrock" on which the nation was built, Goza artfully portrays how lies and caricatures became White America's common sense. Through intellectuals like Grant and popular novelists like Dixon, readers are offered a window into the mythmaking that shaped White America's racist imagination through the early 20th century. Highlighting policymakers in this cultural drama,

Goza persuasively demonstrates a recurring pattern in the United States of the "deadly political art of deferring racial justice."

While generations of educators have truncated our understanding of White supremacy in US history by elevating the civil rights movement as a triumphant end, Goza's deep investigation weaves together the rise of Ronald Reagan and the demise of Martin Luther King's dream for democracy, thus refusing any premature celebration. Instead, *Rebirth of a Nation* asks us to see how the continuing patterns of a White supremacist nation evacuated the real possibilities for cultural change that King and his companions pursued. Goza writes, "As the nation rejected King's vision to increasingly embrace Reagan's racial rationality, the memory of King and the radical transformation that was possible faded. . . . What would America look like if she had repented of the triple evils of racism, materialism, and militarism" that King denounced? Deep and critical analysis of Reagan's economic program in California helps us to feel the effects of "a White supremacy agenda" when explicit racism is no longer the lexicon of public political speech. As Goza uncovers the potent blend of racism, corporate capitalism, and the political power of White Christianity throughout a so-called color-blind era, his analysis helps us to tune into White supremacy's present-day dog whistles.

*Has the US ever been a city on a hill? Or were we always creating the prototype for Nazi Germany?*

In addition to chronicling the struggle for and against White supremacy, *Rebirth of a Nation* makes a critical intervention by placing the United States within an international story. Goza presses readers to consider: Has the US ever been a city on a hill? Or

were we always creating the prototype for Nazi Germany? In accounting for the sins of White supremacy, is the US system better or worse than South African apartheid? However we move toward answers, Goza makes one thing powerfully clear: In contrast to international competitors in inhumanity, the United States has never truly faced its White supremacy problem. Here Goza presents the reparative projects Germany and South Africa have pursued. By contrast, failing to confess our national sins, White America has been free to repeat them.

In Goza's estimation, the time is up for the deferral of responsibility. Indeed, careful readers of the book will be hard-pressed not to see that slavery, lynching, prison, and poverty all demand reparations for Black Americans. In Goza's skillful analysis, we can see that today's White resistance to reparations is part of a diseased refusal to take responsibility for Black suffering inflicted in both the past and the present. In refusing reparations, our moment, too, participates in the long US history of deferring racial justice.

The book's readability, legislative focus, depth of analysis, and comprehensiveness make it powerful, a worthy addition to our anti-racism reading lists. We need more books like Goza's that might foster this decade's "new Jim Crow" moment, when scholarship works to create a sea change in Americans' attitudes toward the institutionalized racial harms in our nation. Offering a significant contribution toward that change, Goza presses readers toward repentance and repair with a bold strategy of reparations that might come as an "aha" moment for the nation. *Rebirth of a Nation* is an excellent place to begin the work of the "reparative age" its author announces. ❑

**JEANNINE HILL FLETCHER** *teaches theology at Fordham University and is author of the forthcoming* Grace of the Ghosts: A Theology of Institutional Reparation.

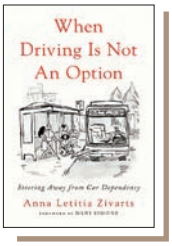
# Can we live without cars?

A pair of new books can challenge Christians to see transportation as an expression of the beloved community.

by G. Travis Norvell


**The 15-Minute City: A Solution to Saving Our Time and Our Planet**

By Carlos Moreno (John Wiley & Sons)




**When Driving Is Not an Option: Steering Away from Car Dependency**

By Anna Letitia Zivarts (Island Press)

**Last summer, as I joined millions of viewers** each day in watching the Olympics, I noticed that the commentators frequently mentioned Paris's push to become a 15-minute city. The concept is quite simple: All of life's necessities can be found within a 15-minute walk, bike ride, or public transit ride from each person's residence.

Carlos Moreno, who grew up in rural Colombia and now teaches at IAE Paris Sorbonne Business School, coined the term "15-minute city" (*ville du quart d'heure*) at the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference, and he has championed it ever since. I submit his new book on the concept as required reading for anyone interested in the flourishing possibility of churches and urban transformation. After all, what is a 15-minute city other than the ancient Christian concept of a parish? Or even the ancient Jewish tradition of a "sabbath day's journey"?

Moreno's genius is not in showing how the trinity of concrete, cars, and oil has ruined the planet but in showing how this trinity has ruined our concept of time. Concrete, cars, and oil have funded an urban life cycle in which we do not work near where we live, we do not know our neighbors, and we are driven by a frenetic pace of life. As Moreno puts it,

> We have gradually lost a sense of proximity and connection with our immediate environment. The constraints of everyday life, demands of work, and social pressures mean that we are constantly on the move, moving away from where we live, and losing the vital link with our local community. This has a detrimental effect on well-being, personal development, and our sense of belonging.

Moreno's proposal for solving these problems is for cities to be intentional about promoting living in proximity to work, leisure, and commercial activities. When distances are reduced, community increases.

Many will balk and say, "This is a great concept, but it is impractical." To combat this retort, Moreno devotes the second half of his book to providing global examples of how concepts of the 15-minute city are being implemented, from

Paris to Portland to Buenos Aires to Busan. The example of Paris looms large throughout the book, as it should: Paris has already been transformed. By last spring, after a few years of converting roads to bikeways, more Parisians were riding bikes for transportation than driving cars. Moreno also takes readers into other cities, revealing how human-made problems can be remade and repurposed. Freeways can be removed (or capped), streets can be repurposed to serve pedestrians and bicyclists in addition to automobiles, parking spots can be repurposed into parklets and extended outdoor spaces for restaurants, remote work can allow for greater flexibility and less commuting.

Moreno aims to expand readers' imaginations, moving us from the resigned framework of "we'll always have Paris" to something more like "it's a beautiful day in the neighborhood." His book is quite timely, because in 2028, the Summer Olympic Games will be in Los Angeles—which has pledged to make the games a car-free event.

That pledge should be a welcome announcement to Anna Zivarts, author of *When Driving Is Not an Option*. Zivarts is a mom with low vision (she was born with the neurological condition nystagmus), a disability activist, and a nondriver. Her book pulls the chair out from under the assumption that everyone in the United States drives a car. In fact, she points out, at least one-third of all Americans do not drive: children under 16, many new immigrants, people with suspended licenses, some senior citizens, some people with disabilities, folks who choose not to drive, and those who cannot afford to. From there, Zivarts reveals where nondrivers are, highlights their difficulties, and proposes solutions.

Although I consider myself a transit activist, Zivarts's book made me feel like a beginner all over again. It is an invitation to drivers to be in solidarity with nondrivers, to imagine being in their places for a moment, and to make decisions with them in mind. When transit decisions are made with nondrivers in mind, Zivarts shows, everyone wins. All of society benefits from better and wider sidewalks, protected bike lanes, longer crossing times at intersections, slower city speed limits, and reliable, frequent, understandable public transit systems.

As I read this book, I kept asking myself: What is the one unspoken requirement for church membership? Driving. Church life is almost always dependent on car ownership, or at least being able to operate a car. What if church life was planned instead around the one-third of people who are nondrivers rather than the two-thirds who are? What if at least one nondriver was asked to be a part of every church board or governing body? What if, before every church decision, the question was asked, "How will this impact the nondrivers in our community?"

Most Christians probably don't spend much of their time thinking about sidewalks, bike lanes, and public transportation as expressions of the beloved community. But that's precisely what they are. Both Moreno and Zivarts invite people of faith to bend the arc of their moral neighborhood toward justice through advocacy. We are not powerless in the realm of transit and urban planning. Almost every local municipality has open seats for citizens to sit on planning commissions, every public works project has open commenting periods, nearly every elected official has forums for citizens to address them, and everyone in the public sector has a way to communicate with them through email, text, phone, or in person.

For churches, the implications of the 15-minute city and the needs of nondrivers are enormous. When we attend to the visions laid out by Moreno and Zivarts, we can help create possibilities of flourishing life for all who live within our parishes. ❑

**G. TRAVIS NORVELL** *is pastor of Judson Memorial Baptist Church in Minneapolis and author of* Church on the Move.

# Settler colonialism discourse and how it falls short

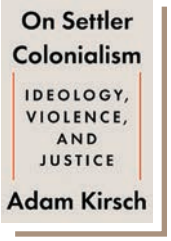
Adam Kirsch suggests that what was once an academic discipline has become a new religion.

by John E. Phelan Jr.

**The standard version of colonialism,** explains Adam Kirsch in his provocative and important new book, involves a relatively small group of colonists—mostly colonial administrators, merchants, and military personnel—ruling over and oppressing a much larger Indigenous population, usually to extract needed natural resources. An example is the British colonial control of what is now India and Pakistan, where in 1931 a population of 250 million was ruled by a mere 150,000 "European British subjects." France controlled 23 million Vietnamese with only 40,000 Frenchmen. Similar disparities existed in colonized regions throughout Asia and Africa. In the decades following World War II, successful revolutionary movements drove out their colonial overlords and established independent states. As Kirsch notes, "according to the UN, the number of people living under colonial rule fell from 750 million in 1945 to 2 million in 2020."

But this was not the only form of colonialism. While some colonizers came to extract needed resources and exploit cheap labor, others came to stay. The latter became known as "settler colonialism," and its chief examples are the United States, Canada, and Australia. In each case, the colonizers came not simply to extract resources but to establish a new homeland. The Indigenous population was either ruthlessly eliminated, confined to certain areas (reservations), or assimilated through often brutal educational enterprises.

Kirsch suggests that as the theory of settler colonialism developed, what began as a tool to distinguish between forms of colonialism became less of an academic discipline than a religion. The act of colonization became a form of original sin that is inherited by all the heirs of the original colonizers. "*Settler*, in this view, is not a description of the actions of an individual, but a heritable identity," Kirsch writes. "In fact, it's not even necessary to be the lineal descendent of an original dispossessor to qualify as a settler." So, for example, even the descendants of Africans brought against their will to what became the United States are now considered settlers. Construed this way, settler colonialism, like the sin of Adam and Eve, produced evils that continue to oppress and corrupt the colonized peoples and lands: "Settler colonialism means that the violence involved in a nation's founding continues to define every aspect of its life, even after centuries—its economic arrangements, environmental practices, gender relations."




**On Settler Colonialism: Ideology, Violence, and Justice**

By Adam Kirsch (W. W. Norton)

Settler colonialism discourse also has its own eschatology. Kirsch cites Lorenzo Veracini, a scholar of settler colonialism, who writes that every attempt to include, acknowledge, reconcile, and make reparations for colonial sins is a form of "transfer," and despite such ameliorating efforts "all [settlers] participate in the logic of genocide." In this view, the only way for settlers to atone for their sins is to leave or die off and return the land to its original inhabitants. And according to the eschatological vision of some critics, this is what will eventually happen. By some unknown means, the settlers will disappear, and the land once more will flourish under the care of its original inhabitants.

Theorists of settler colonialism consider "settler ways of being" responsible for "virtually everything one objects to in modern American life—from selfishness to strip mining to the scientific method," writes Kirsch. The problem with this, he argues, is that it makes serious political action to address such difficulties impossible. In this view, every desirable outcome in society—economic equality, environmental conservation, sexual liberation, and an end to racism—can only be accomplished by the destruction of "settler ways of being," which, Kirsch notes, involves the destruction of the settlers themselves. One cannot and evidently should not try to address such evils through communal action, since the community itself is tainted by "settler ways of being."

Once the monster of settler colonialism is slain, Kirsch writes, the theory is that "all these evils will disappear at the same time." He continues: "The great appeal of radical ideologies has always been this promise of a final solution." And such "final solutions" frequently

end in violence and always end in disappointment.

Kirsch is not suggesting that there are no evils to be addressed. Far from it. Rather he is arguing that to assert that an abstraction like "settler colonialism" is the key to explain and eventually eliminate those evils is ultimately naive. It is an example of a kind of magical thinking that is unworthy of the seriousness of the ills it seeks to address.

As noted, the primary examples of settler colonialism have been the United States, Canada, and Australia. Today, however, the principal and most reviled example in many realms of discourse is the state of Israel. Kirsch calls this "puzzling on its face." He points out that the Jews who settled in Palestine did not come from a colonial power who sent them out to secure needed natural resources or open new markets for its goods. Nor did they attempt to destroy the Arab population, however much misery the state has inflicted on it. Kirsch notes that in the years following the Israeli Declaration of Independence in 1948, "the Arab population of historic Palestine more than quintupled."

A clearer example of settler colonialism in the 21st century, he argues, is China, where Tibetan children have been compelled to attend residential schools "aimed at assimilating Tibetan people." The misery of the Uighur people is also well known: "Since 2017 more than a million Muslim Uighurs have been detained in what the Chinese government calls vocational training centers." Others call them reeducation camps.

None of this is to excuse the mistreatment of Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories (the latter of which Kirsch does not discuss) or the tragic number of civilian deaths in the current war. It is rather to suggest that the concept of "settler colonialism" is the wrong tool to critique Israel's policies and practices—and that it could have tragic consequences for both Palestinians and Jews.

Israel is the one place in the world where the aims of those who wish to eradicate what they characterize as settler colonialism could plausibly be realized. To imagine that one could drive out the entire European settler population from the United States, Canada, or Australia stretches the credulity of even the most dedicated advocate of the theory of settler colonialism. This can only be dreamed of in some distant millennium when the Indigenous population recovers the land from the ashes of civilizational collapse and restores their way of life as if nothing had happened. But Israel is different. One can imagine all the Jews killed or driven out.

*There are two narratives in Israel/Palestine. They are contradictory—but they are both true.*

Here the colonial model fails as a tool to understand Israel and its history. When the French were driven from Algeria, the large French settler population could return to France. When the British colonial powers were thrown out of Africa and Asia, the British could return to Great Britain. For the Jews of Israel, there is no native land to return to. For Israel's Jews, Israel is their native land. Many of them went there to flee lands in which they were not considered native. And it is hard to imagine any European country today—or, for that matter, the United States—absorbing 7 million Israeli Jews. They are likely to be as reluctant to take in such large numbers of additional Jews as they were during the Second World War.

This is especially poignant to consider today, when Jews in Europe are, as in the past, fleeing Europe for Israel. When Jews hear, "Palestine will be free, from the river to the sea!" many of them hear, "All the Jews must die." The October 7, 2023, attack seemed to many a precursor to an even greater slaughter.

The religious character of the concept of settler colonialism means that any attempt through political processes to establish a just society where Jews and Palestinians live together in peace is a heresy. If the only possibility for justice entails the destruction of one people or the other, such justice is a murderous illusion. The irony of Israel is that according to the theology of settler colonialism, the Jews' return to sovereignty in their ancient homeland after being driven out by the Romans (among others) is an example of an Indigenous people returning to and reclaiming its homeland.

And this illustrates the problem of the theory. When the Jews returned to their homeland, they found that another people, by long occupation and deep love, also considered it their homeland. As the distinguished Israeli journalist Yossi Klein Halevi has said, there are two narratives in Israel/Palestine. They are contradictory—but they are both true. Until both the Jews and Palestinians fully reckon with this fact, no solution that does not involve genocide is possible. The past, Kirsch points out, cannot be undone. In fact, "despair over the past is what makes it possible to hope for a better future, instead of perpetuating grievances and blood feuds." Drawing on the work of French sociologist Maxime Rodinson, Kirsch continues:

> It is a sign of ignorance to turn any country into a symbol of evil, but in the case of [the United States and Israel], it is also a sign of ideological malice. And ideologues who "preach vengeance and murder from an ivory tower," in Rodinson's words, should be rebuked for their inhumanity, not praised for their idealism.

The intellectual rigor, despair, and hope of this short book make an essential contribution to a debased conversation. I trust it will help redirect this conversation from outrage and despair to compassion and justice for the tormented people of Israel/Palestine. ❑

**JOHN E. PHELAN JR.** *is author of* Separated Siblings: An Evangelical Understanding of Jews and Judaism.

# The buried and the unburied

Richard Price's latest novel follows four characters, each affected by the collapse of a tenement building in East Harlem.

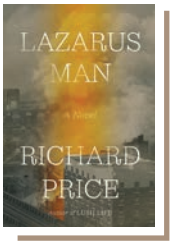
by Joshua B. Grace

**Imagine waking up beneath the rubble** of a fallen five-story tenement in East Harlem three days after its collapse. You're bruised and sore, your lungs on fire from the dust and fibers you've inhaled during your days of limbo, but otherwise you are unscathed. Would you see this as a second chance at life? No one would have expected to find you alive. Everyone would consider your survival a miracle. Would you have a message for the people astonished by your continued existence? What would you tell them? What would you do?

These are the questions Richard Price explores in *Lazarus Man*. Yet he doesn't ask the questions early. The novel focuses elsewhere for roughly the first third of its 337 pages before pulling the Lazarus man, Anthony Carter, out of the rubble. That delay begs us to ask why it exists. What purpose does it serve to introduce Anthony at the beginning of the novel and then set him aside to focus on other characters for roughly 100 pages after the collapse of the tenement sets everything in motion in the novel's brief first act? What's the story here?

According to some reviewers, there's not much of a story at all. Apart from the precipitating event, the building's collapse, there's not much capital-D Drama. Instead, for 100 pages, Price focuses on the smaller stories that play out in the wake of the larger destruction. These stories follow three characters who each have a different connection to the collapse. Felix Pearl is a young aspiring photographer who lives in an apartment close to the explosion and responds to the building's collapse by snapping pictures. Royal Davis is the owner of a dying funeral home who wonders if the collapse might lead to better business. Mary Roe is a community affairs officer and former detective tasked with identifying the tenement's residents, both listed and unlisted, as well as its victims and survivors.

Throughout the novel's second act, we follow these characters as they react to the fallout of the building collapse, which echoes and evokes the street-level chaos that followed the collapse of the Twin Towers. More importantly, however, we also follow Felix, Royal, and Mary as their paths lead them away from the fallout and back into the complexities of their lives and relationships. Given how large, loud, and important the novel's central event seems, it's notable that we spend most of the second act inundated with the mundanity of Felix's insecurity and imposter syndrome, Royal's inadequacies as a businessman and father, and Mary's disconnected relationships with her children, her ex-husband, and the lover who wants to make more of their affair than she does.




**Lazarus Man: A Novel**

By Richard Price (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)

The contrast between the import of the tenement's collapse and the mundanity of our protagonists' personal concerns dominates the novel's second act, until the third act turns the novel in a new direction when Anthony figuratively returns from the dead. Fortunately, Price does an excellent job of bringing his characters and their situations to life. Most reviews applaud the authenticity of Price's urban details and dialogue, and I agree with their assessment.

Many of the novel's best scenes illustrate the different ways people find just to get by in a city like New York. Such is the case in one scene where Mary and her partner Billy arrive at an attempted bank robbery and find the robber ready and willing to accept his fate:

> "What's your name?" Mary asked.
> "Tony G."
> "Tony G, you tried to rob that bank?"
> "Yeah, but I changed my mind."
> "You gave the teller a note?"
> "I did, yes, but I took it back."
> "Well, you can't unpass a note," Bobby said, reaching for his cuffs.
> "He knows that," Mary grunted, double-pissed and then some.
> "That being said, I wasn't unpleasant to the young lady," Tony G offered, "You can ask her."
> "Yeah, ok."
> "So, what now?" he asked as the cuffs hit home.
> "What do you think?" Mary asked.
> "State or federal?"
> "Fed crime, fed time." Mary again.
> "How much time?"
> "Two, three years, minimum."
> "Ok."

It's scenes like this—and their vibrant, clear-eyed exploration of urban life—that cause me to believe the reviewers who complain that the novel suffers for the lack of a clear plot are missing the point. The sudden, unexpected deaths

caused by the tenement's collapse spotlight the fact that while the novel's three active protagonists are very much alive, their lives are broken and hollow. Throughout the second act, Price doesn't make this point clear by telling us. He makes it clear by showing us. He roots us in his characters' thoughts, and we become sympathetic to their lives and struggles.

Thus, when Anthony reappears in the third act and begins to inspire audiences with the story of his miraculous recovery, Price has prepared us to detect his other protagonists' nuanced reactions. Royal and Felix respond to Anthony with varying levels of skepticism and opportunism based on their own deepest concerns, and Mary finds herself torn. Anthony's appearance and his messages of joy speak to the emptiness in her life, but her detective's instincts leave her uneasy. Something in his delivery and demeanor puts her off, and it nags at her even as she tries to track down the last of the names on her list from the tenement's residents.

Mary's detective work takes on greater importance throughout the third act when it functions like the plot element that moves the story forward. It also serves as the grit that balances Anthony's new optimism and his inspiring message of gratitude. Indeed, Anthony's gratitude for his second chance at life, contrasted with the protagonists' daily grinds, truly drives the third act. Anthony has his doubts and his moments of weakness, but the novel is buoyant and uplifting when he shares his message with others, and even when he taps into the wellspring of gratitude to recharge his own outlook.

Ultimately, Mary's investigations provide us something of a plot that Price resolves by the end of the book, but the resolution of this plot feels forced. As Price weaves the strands together, the writing becomes increasingly terse and practical. We stop exploring the protagonists' inner lives with such care and patience. In the end, Price allows Anthony a line that seems to serve as the novel's lesson: "Believe in that higher power, lean on it if that's what you need to do, but for God's sake believe in yourself. Think of where you've been, think of what you've already endured then tell yourself . . . 'And yet, and yet, here I still am.'"

*While the novel's earliest protagonists are very much alive, their lives are broken and hollow.*

When Anthony says these words, however, the novel feels incomplete. Too much about the characters feels unresolved. It feels as if some threads were wrapped up too easily, others were forgotten, and others had so much potential for further exploration that it's a shame to leave them.

Even though *Lazarus Man* ends too abruptly, Price deserves considerable credit for asking big questions and exploring the answers primarily through careful examination of his characters' lives and situations. He presents us with questions and allows us to look for answers amid the emotional struggles he creates and defines. We may or may not see ourselves among the novel's protagonists, but we will find echoes of our personal struggles with the weight and tedium of existence, of experiencing gratitude in our moments of epiphany, and of the joys we feel when we don't just realize but truly *feel* that life is a gift. *Lazarus Man* may be an imperfect novel, but we humans are all imperfect, and Price succeeds tremendously in tapping deeply into our shared humanity. ❑

**JOSHUA B. GRACE** *is a freelance writer and marketer from the Twin Cities.*

# Life's mysteries, juxtaposed

Theresa Monteiro's debut poetry collection delivers a cosmic vision that always bursts through the mundane.

by Peggy Rosenthal

**Throughout Theresa Monteiro's debut poetry collection,** we're offered striking images for a sense of life's mysteries. Sometimes it's in the wonder of the most ordinary circumstances, as in the poem "From Inside the Whirlwind":

> Or watch, with a child's
> small joy, as the ring around
> the number four lights up
> when you press it—
> feel the elevator
> loft you up,
> holding all your weight.

But often it's through unexpected juxtapositions that Monteiro evokes life's mysteries. So, for instance, the poem "Solomon Says" moves from the biblical quotation "Wisdom is more mobile than any motion" to "Mama's gotta / fry an egg while she spells / cantaloupe." And in "Topography of Another April," the poet asks:

> How did we travel
> From the tunnel of a brain scan
> to a woman in a tent selling
> skeins of woolen yarn
> the color of nectarines, varied?

In "Who Sees," Monteiro helps readers notice:

> Below the power lines
> only two squirrels
> see the mail carrier step
>
> Over a sidewalk chalk drawing.
> He drives his mother to the salon
> every Friday.

These surprising juxtapositions are delightful. They evoke a sense of life's wondrously unforeseen connections.

We're treated to such a surprise again in the book's title poem, in which a mother, after she "scrubs each child clean," sends her children

**Under This Roof**
By Theresa Monteiro
(Fernwood)

> on their way
> where they find no paralegals
> among the Church Triumphant.
> They've left pencils and
> neckties on the ground. Traded them
> for singing

This poem, the book's longest, has five sections. The first features a literal roof, and "under this roof / recessed lights flicker above / a table where a couple eats / their shadowy veal." Shadowy veal? This bizarre image makes me smile.

In the poem's next section, we move from blood in our body to a flooding basement via the rhyming of *blood* and *flood*:

> Poets claim a broken heart . . .
> Something strange between the lungs,
> communicator of murky
> blood inside a woman, in a basement,
> flooding. The woman watches it fill.

The next section of the poem is set in the Middle Ages, when "monks thread pages / *summas*, silent" and "Aquinas sighs—*This work is straw*." ("All that I have written seems like straw to me," Thomas Aquinas reportedly said near the end of his life.) Monteiro moves from Aquinas's straw into the adjacent image of a stable, where "a heavy cow / shelters her calf against / her milky belly, lowing / on a bed of straw."

The fourth section of "Under This Roof" shifts from Dante's *Purgatorio* to the paralegals and neckties that appear (as quoted above) when a mother scrubs her children. The poem's final section plays with a supposed prohibition against using the word *behold* in contemporary poetry. Monteiro teasingly defies the prohibition: "But—behold the moon! / don't just look— / hold your gaze, see?" After pulling *hold* out of *behold*, Monteiro ends the poem by merging two unrelated biblical allusions:

> See the brightness of arterial blood—
> seventy times seven thread
> through the eye of the needle
> opened wide.

We know that "seventy times seven" is the number of times Jesus says

*Monteiro's cosmic vision suggests that she can hear God speaking to her.*

we must forgive someone who has sinned against us (Matt. 18:22). And going "through the eye of the needle" comes from Jesus' saying about how hard it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God (Mark 10:25). The fun here is in Monteiro's taking the phrases out of context to create a playful composite image.

Monteiro's epigraph for the title poem—Joan of Arc's question "How else would God speak to me, if not through my imagination?"—could be the epigraph for the entire book. That Monteiro does indeed hear God speaking to her is reinforced by other biblical references—and even more so by what I'd call her cosmic vision.

What's remarkable about this vision is that it always bursts through the mundane. In "New World Symphony," for instance, a Dvořák symphony is "shaking / our house, above our town, / through blue atmosphere / and black space." And later in the poem:

> Imagine the music
> from an immigrant's hand
> moving eternally through galaxies
> and, maybe, all the way
> to a black hole.

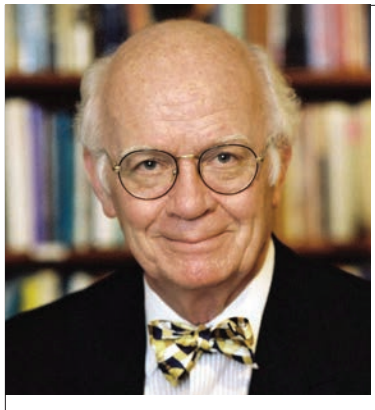
A similar sense of revelation unfolds in the final lines of the book's final poem:

> Because my father knows the difference
> between the rocky shoreline
> and the view from his porch, is nothing
> compared with the distance between that ocean
> and the stillness that's to come.

The cosmic in the mundane, strikingly unforeseen juxtapositions evoking life's mysteries, and all this in poems that delight even as they stretch our minds: these are the gifts of Monteiro's debut volume. I look forward to her next collection. ❑

**PEGGY ROSENTHAL** *is author of* The Poets' Jesus.





***Martin E. Marty (1928–2025)**, considered by many to be the foremost interpreter of American religion in the second half of the 20th century, served as an editor at THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY for 50 years.*

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# Committed spies

In *Black Bag*, two MI6 agents have the audacity to put their marriage first.

by Kathryn Reklis

*Kathryn Reklis teaches theology at Fordham University.*

**"Not everyone aspires to your flagrant monogamy,"** Philip Meacham (Gustaf Skarsgård) says a bit sarcastically to his colleague George Woodhouse (Michael Fassbender) in the opening scene of *Black Bag* (directed by Steven Soderbergh). The two men are discussing Philip's infidelity, which has put his marriage in jeopardy. "I just wish it wasn't so fucking easy to cheat. For us," Philip complains. The "us" refers to their shared profession as British intelligence officers, a job in which lying, subterfuge, and moral ambiguity are less ethical dilemmas than professional skills.

The two men are discussing marriage because Philip has just handed George a list of names of other MI6 agents who are possible suspects in a devastating security leak of a top-secret computer code that can override nuclear safety protocols. George's wife, Kathryn (Cate Blanchett), is on the list. George is the agency's top internal security expert, with a reputation for sniffing out even the smallest of lies and remaining committed to truth even at great personal cost. "I hate liars," he explains to a younger colleague when she learns the legendary story of how he exposed his own father, also a security agent, for infidelity and gross misconduct. But everyone knows George is unwaveringly devoted to Kathryn, and no one is sure how he will respond if she turns out to be the mole.

This is ostensibly the tension of the film: two spies who spend their lives deceiving others and uncovering deception, forced to bring their professional lives into the domestic realm. But the real tension is monogamy itself. Single-minded devotion to anything but the mission is surely a liability, and Kathryn and George's "flagrant monogamy" is seen as a professional and personal weakness.

*Cate Blanchett and Michael Fassbender in* Black Bag

The other people on George's list of possible double agents are two other couples. Two central scenes involve George and Kathryn inviting these couples to their home so George can try to extract information and observe their reactions. What unfolds is enough vitriol, insecurity, and backbiting to make one foreswear dating forever. Although both couples are supposed to be in the first flushes of new love, their relationships are already riddled with loathing and lies. "When you can lie about everything, when you can deny everything, how do you tell the truth about anything?" asks Clarissa (Marisa Abela), a young data analyst and one part of a couple under investigation. "How does that work?"

This is well-worn territory in the spy genre. Everything the spy does is justified by a sense of existing just outside the moral and social laws that govern the rest of us. The spy isn't governed by such prosaic conventions as "do not kill" and "do not cheat." The spy may have sizzling affairs or even romance, but never something as boring and stable as monogamous marriage. Watching the spy slip the noose of middle-class morality is part of the titillating thrill of the genre.

Usually this is all part of the subtext of a spy story, the electric undercurrent that gives the morally ambiguous actions their vicarious zing. By centering the story around George and Kathryn's marriage, the film suggests that this kind of moral pleading is as hollow as it sounds. The other couples don't come off as glamorous spies elegantly skating on the edges of moral and social norms. They come off as stunted, confused adults who have forgotten there are even norms to flout.

You don't have to be a spy to feel this moral vertigo. Most depictions of marriage in popular culture, especially among the wealthy, professional

CLAUDETTE BARIUS / FOCUS FEATURES

classes, assume this lack of moral center. Watching *Black Bag*, I kept thinking of the wealthy couples in the HBO series *The White Lotus* or the new AppleTV+ show *Your Friends and Neighbors*. In both cases, marriage is a merger of assets, a hedge to protect wealth, or maybe a chance to maximize personal growth. But it is almost never a bulwark against deception or infidelity, which prove to be the rule more than the exception, with or without the excuse of national security.

Maybe morality is the wrong measure in these cases. George and Kathryn's marriage isn't predicated on some inviolable moral law; they don't remain faithful out of fear of religious or social reprisals. Their monogamy is more like an anchor in a world that strips everything for parts and assumes everything can be leveraged or expended for self-interest.

George and Kathryn's home is swaddled in golden light and dark green and wood tones, signaling their elegance and wealth but also setting up a contrast to the world of intelligence work, which is all glass and steel and florescent light. This could suggest that their home is full of secrets and dark corners compared to the bright revelations of their office space, where everyone can see everything.

As the plot unfolds with schemes and counterschemes, stolen secrets, and double crosses, the valence of these spaces shifts. Their home feels more like a final refuge of privacy and reticence, a hearth with a secret fire they tend away from the harsh demands to strip themselves of all individual commitments and loyalties. As the guests at their dinner party trade recriminations, George and Kathryn's eyes lock across the table like smoldering coals, hinting at a world of private commitments that gives them ballast. Everyone around them feels the pull of their commitment, but it is precisely the thing no one else can access, hack, or share.

Their colleagues assume this is a weakness. Much of the plot revolves around other people trying to exploit their devotion to each other for their own ends. But their monogamy isn't a rule to be followed for other ends. It is an end in itself, and it's their greatest asset. ❑

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Steve Novick's (clockwise from left) ***The Pill; Epitaph; Cemetery Table***

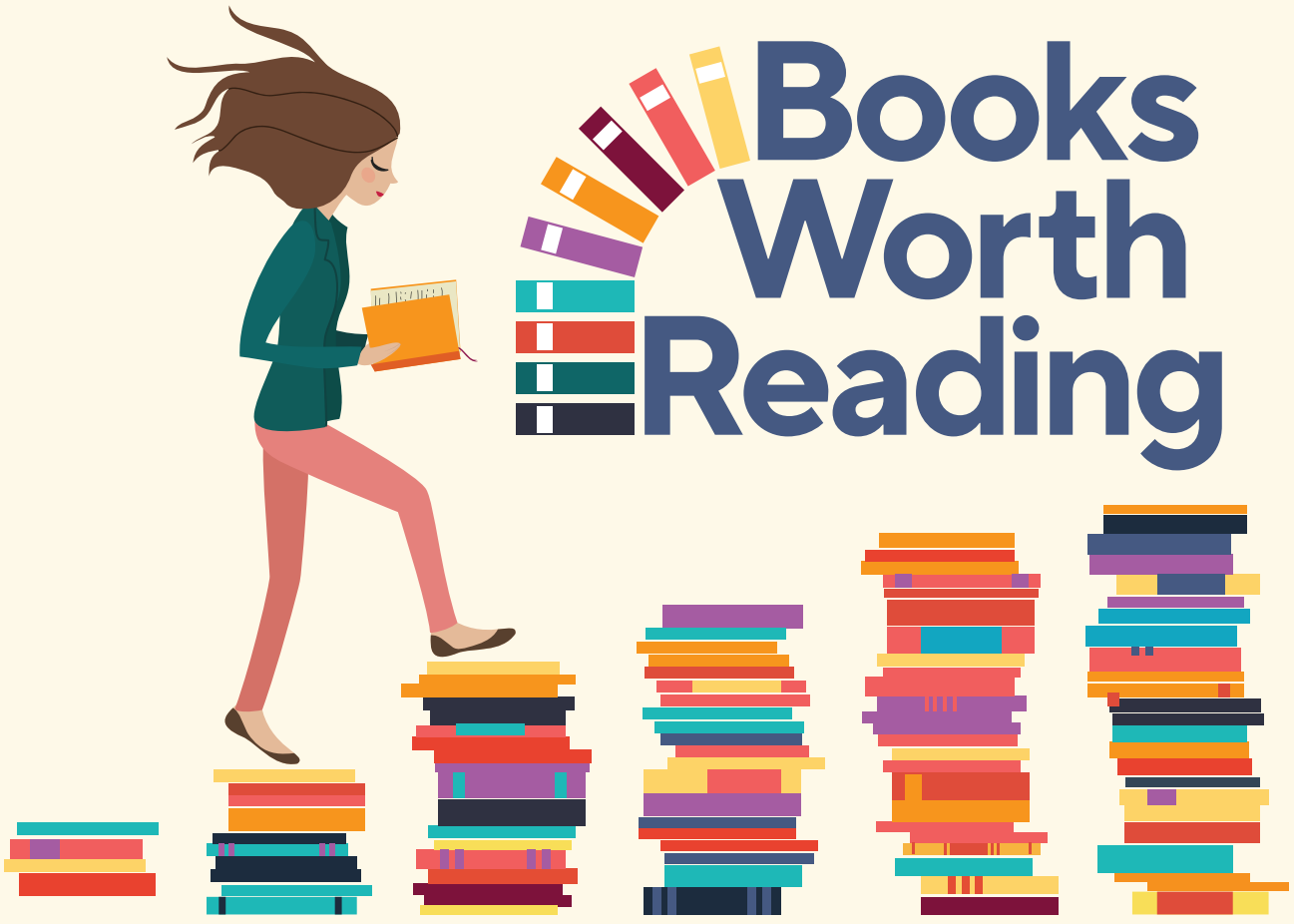
Steve Novick's work balances delicately on the seesaw of paradox. It is subversive but reverent, iconic but mundane, simple but complex. To me, these tensions make him an acute commentator on religious rituals and language.

In *The Pill* (2024), Novick deploys a cutting board to suggest a face, tongue extended to receive a puck of medicine or perhaps the eucharistic host. Three slabs of found wood are sufficient to pose probing questions. Is communion a form of placebo or does it offer a spiritual panacea? Who has placed this wafer on the tongue? Has the viewer become the priest, sacralizing the gallery experience, or are we invited to take this mysterious pill from the artist?

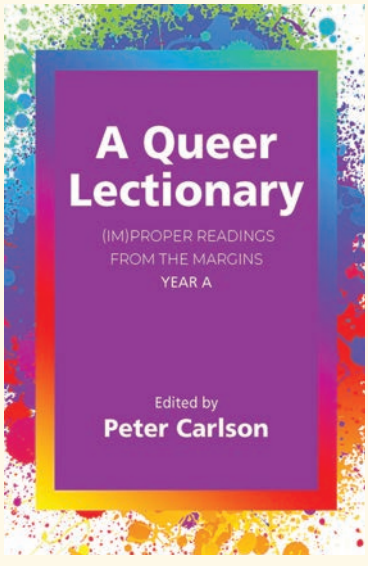
Many of Novick's recent works meditate on death and memory, inducing appreciative smirks that ripen into philosophical quandaries. In *Epitaph* (2022), a marble slab has a few bars of black rubber pasted across its surface, suggesting the black mark of a redactor's pen. This censorious touch suggests the despotic reach of autocracy, effacing identity even unto death. But the work is no prisoner to our present political moment. It also reminds us that however pridefully specific our lives may appear, the details are—in the grander scheme—inconsequential, fading to black.

With another piece of found marble, Novick continues these ruminations on mortality. In *Cemetery Table* (2024), rather than standing upright, a tiny headstone lies supine on a miniature coffee table. Stone turns to flesh, suggesting an examination table or embalming station, recalling Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632) or Mantegna's *Dead Christ* (c. 1480). On the one hand, Novick reveals the bald face of consumerism, in which even mortuary or memorial rites can become luxury objects. But he also taps into a long tradition of meditating on the inevitability of death, from the memento mori in Western art to depictions of corpse meditation in Buddhist art. Perhaps placing a reminder of death in one's living room is not insulting to the dead but a corrective for the living. ❑

*Art commentary by* **AARON ROSEN,** *executive director of the Clemente Course in the Humanities and founder of the Parsonage Gallery. His latest book is* What Would Jesus See?




## CHRISTIAN CENTURY books editor Elizabeth Palmer sorts through her stacks

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