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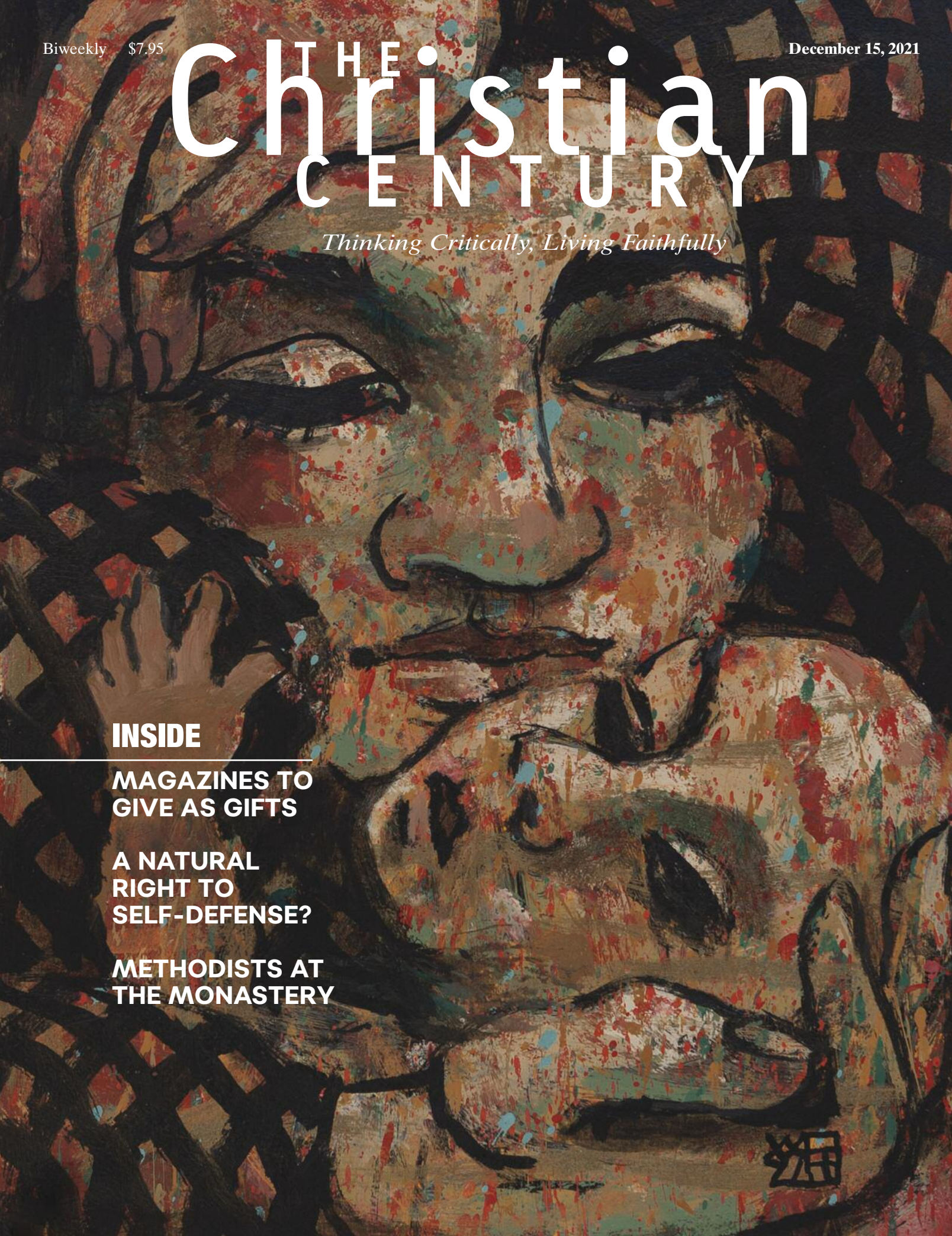
The Christian Century

Thinking Critically, Living Faithfully



INSIDE

GIVE

LOVE
JOY
HOPE
PEACE

'Tis the season for love, joy, hope and peace.

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From the editor/publisher

Peter W. Marty

Playing God

A *New Yorker* cartoon depicts a couple of men in first-century garb beside a pack mule. "Right now, I'm his apostle," one says to the other, "but my dream is to someday be my own Messiah." The idea of a messiah complex has reached the bumper sticker world as well: "Honk if you are Jesus." The term itself isn't clinical in nature as much as it's a category of religious delusion that can show up in individuals suffering perceptions of grandeur.

Sixty-two years ago, three male patients with paranoid schizophrenia and delusional disorder at Ypsilanti State Hospital in Michigan were intensively studied for their own messiah complexes. Each believed that he was the physical reincarnation of Jesus Christ. Their mistaken perception of reality would have presented little problem had it not been for a social psychologist named Milton Rokeach who, for the better part of two years, manipulated their lives through a study with questionable ethics.

Using various methods of entrapment and deception, Rokeach sought to pit these three men against each other, in hopes that they might cure one another of their delusion. They were assigned adjacent beds, seats next to each other in the cafeteria, and jobs in the laundry room at the same time. Fights and rants regularly broke out amid daylong arguments. One of the men would claim, "I'm the Messiah, the Son of God. I am on a mission. I was sent here to save the earth." "How do you know?" Rokeach would ask. "God told me." That's when another one of the patients would pipe up: "I never told you any such thing."

Joseph, Clyde, and Leon never stopped believing they were each the Christ. But despite the study's psychological torment, they became friends, learned to empathize with one another, and gave each other the chance to keep their own belief.

In 1964, Rokeach summarized his findings in *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*. It would be another 20 years, however, before he acknowledged his ethical lapses. In the afterword of a later edition, he writes, "While I had failed to cure the three Christs of their delusions, they had succeeded in curing me of mine—of my God-like delusion that I could change them by omnipotently . . . rearranging their daily lives. . . . I really had no right, even in the name of science, to play God and interfere around-the-clock with their daily lives."

One need not be a social scientist or a person suffering grandiose delusions in order to play God. As it turns out, any of us is capable of that distortion. In fact, the more comfortable we become with our financial security, the more competent we are in our workplaces, and the more confidently we rely on our own charm and ingenuity, the easier it becomes to embrace a kind of omnipotence. Some days, we ought to pity God for having to try to wrestle any humility out of us.

But God is wiser than we know. Once God hits on the idea of putting the vulnerability of a newborn up against our own invulnerability, our inclination to play God suffers a permanent reckoning. The incarnation was a brilliant move. For what infant holds any delusion about its own omnipotence? We've been trying to learn from that peculiar gift of vulnerability ever since, which is why we need Christmas all over again.

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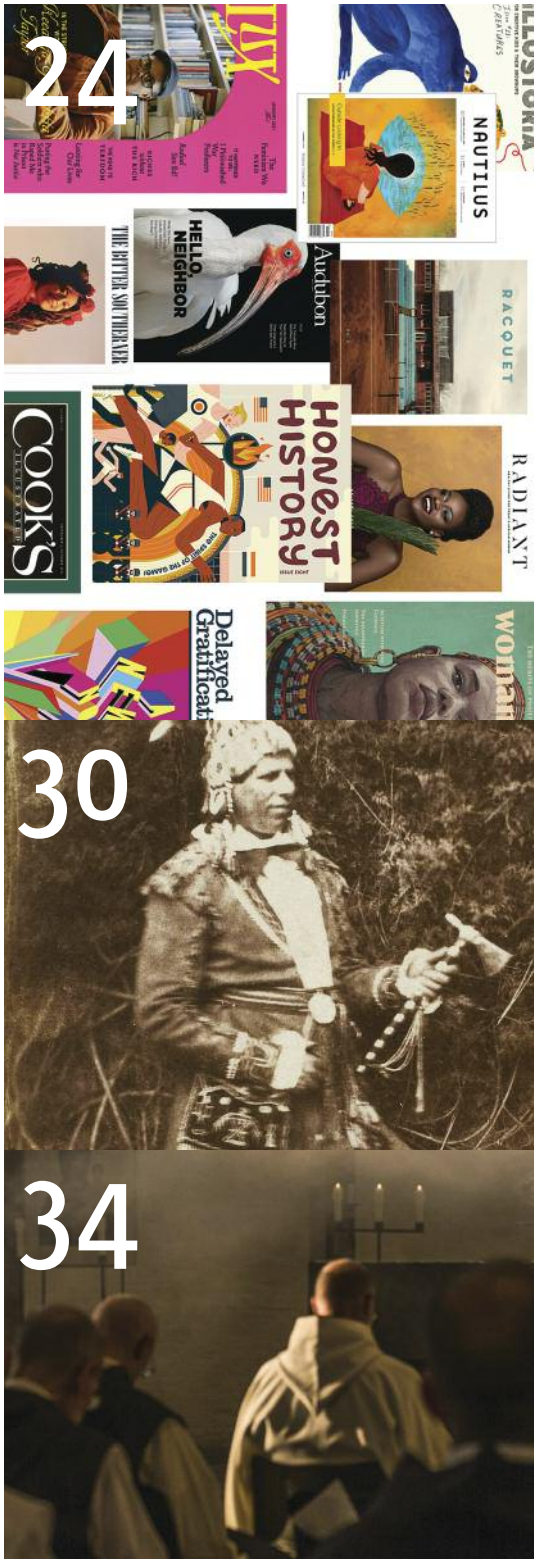

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Hope for migrants?

Your magazine is a support in living my daily life as a follower of Jesus, and Isaac Villegas's writing is regularly helpful. I have been a remote volunteer with Al Otro Lado for over six months now and have heard the stories of more than 100 migrant families. Hearing them in the first person, in their own voice, is more heartrending than reading an account. In order to do the work, I have to set my emotions to one side most of the time, but they never go away.

Villegas's description of his time at Casa del Migrante is lovely ("In Miguel's kitchen," Nov. 17). But when I came to this line describing the woman and her son from El Salvador—"they fled her home a couple weeks ago after the cartel tried to recruit her 16-year-old son. She is on her way to her sister in Fresno, if they're able to get across"—I broke down sobbing because, given the current border policies, they will not get across.

Under Title 42, asylum seekers are not allowed to present their cases at the border. They are not allowed to ask for asylum anywhere. A few very serious cases may receive humanitarian parole into the United States, but this woman and her son would not qualify.

To readers who were moved by this article, let me say that you may not be able to give a week to help at Casa del Migrante, but you can call your elected representatives and ask for an end to Title 42 and that the borders be opened so that migrants desperately seeking asylum can at least and at last be heard.

Patricia Black
Crescent City, CA

Better relations with Iran . . .

I am grateful for K. L. Marshall's article "Fundamentalism and oil" (Nov. 3)

and her invitation to rethink the US-Iran relationship. Marshall provides a helpful historical framework, with an eye on how the US thirst for oil and fundamentalist political pressures in both cases have locked us into nearly 70 years of hostility.

Among Marshall's suggestions is to transform the status quo with "values-based" and compassionate policies toward the Iranian people. Marshall's bold suggestion to win over Iranian moderates would be enhanced by a bold policy change in favor of Palestinian rights, a cause honored by Iranians and most of the Middle East. Such changes will demand tough love and firm diplomacy with Israel and Saudi Arabia. A US return to the Iran nuclear treaty is long overdue, as is desperately needed COVID relief.

In 2016, my wife and I signed up for an education tour of Iran organized by US and Canadian Mennonites. Our group of 35 Canadian and US citizens was scheduled to depart for Iran in late October 2016—but then the US contingent did not receive its Iranian visas. Our Iranian hosts suggested we delay and depart on November 7, but we again failed to receive visas in time. On November 8 Donald Trump was elected president, and we learned that the visas weren't coming. While we received no official statement, our Iranian hosts said the "indefinite delay" was a direct result of the US election.

The Canadians had a fantastic trip. Iran's concerns over a Trump victory were confirmed when he withdrew from the nuclear treaty and increased sanctions on Iran.

As we approach 70 years of hostile relations, I hope for what Marshall proposes: a policy that offers compassion through humanitarian and economic assistance to the Iranian people. Careful diplomacy with the conservative leadership in Iran can include a return to the nuclear treaty, COVID relief, and an end to sanctions that punish the Iranian people. We hope and pray for a new era of rapprochement. Thanks to Marshall for detailing a hopeful way forward.

Don Wagner
Orland Hills, IL

A good change . . .

My compliments to Brittney Cooper for her fantastic How My Mind Has Changed essay ("Returning to repentance," Nov. 17). I have shared it far and wide. May it help many people to see the goodness of changing one's mind! Thank you, all of you who produce the magazine.

Carolyn C. Peterson
Houghton, MI

THE Christian CENTURY

Democracy's death spiral

December 15, 2021

In the 2020 election, Democrats won control over Washington, but Republicans won big in the states. In a census year, this put Republicans in charge of redrawing a lot of congressional districts. Now a *New York Times* analysis has found that if the 2020 election were held today and everyone voted the same way, the Democrats' majority of votes would no longer win them a majority of seats. The Republicans would lose the popular vote yet gain control of the House of Representatives anyway.

Both major parties have gerrymandered congressional districts. But Republicans have developed the state-level power, the fine-tuned skill, and the general audacity to do it to far greater effect. The 2022 midterms may well demonstrate what a truly undemocratic change of power looks like—and that's in the House, easily the most democratic institution in the federal government. Both the Senate and the electoral college are beholden to the disproportionate power of smaller, more conservative states. The Democrats would be at a major disadvantage even if everyone played fair.

They don't, of course. This year, 19 Republican-controlled states passed laws making it harder to vote. Many target early voting and absentee ballots, the focus of baseless accusations of fraud in the 2020 election. Four states have introduced or increased criminal penalties—to go along with the existing harassment—for things like handing out water to voters waiting in line or helping people with disabilities turn in their ballots. A sweeping new law in Texas specifically targets voter access initiatives that proved successful in Democratic Houston.

Gerrymandering makes certain voters irrelevant; these state laws prevent others from voting in the first place. The two strategies are working in tandem to give Republicans an overwhelming advantage.

And if they lose anyway, they might not admit it. When he left office, President Trump shredded one more democratic norm: accepting defeat. Since then, state and local election officials who honorably chose democracy over Trump—many of them Republicans—have been targeted for electoral defeat by Trump loyalists. In the coming years, close elections in a given state may come down to which candidate happens to have something in common with the secretary of state: fealty to the former president.

> The party in Trump's thrall is going after the very notion of fair elections.

Trump and the party in his thrall are going after the very notion of fair elections. Yet Congress has failed to act to protect them. GOP senators unanimously blocked both a sweeping election reform bill this summer and another, far less ambitious one this fall. Last month, a narrow bill to shore up protections of the 1965 Voting Rights Act did manage to get one GOP vote (it needed ten). Senate Republicans could not be clearer: there will be no bipartisan action to protect elections.

To pass any such law, Senate Democrats will have to change the filibuster rule instead. That's long been necessary (see "Let the majority rule," Dec. 16, 2020). Right now, it's urgent. Democracy is under open attack, and it needs defenders of all political parties and persuasions. Failing that, it needs whatever defenders it has to act anyway.

—The Editors

CENTURY marks

MATERNAL DANGER: A study led by reproductive epidemiologist Maeve Wallace of Tulane University found that pregnant and postpartum women in the United States are more than twice as likely to die of homicide than of pregnancy-related causes such as bleeding or placental disorders. The study also found that for women under age 45, pregnancy increases the risk of homicide by 16 percent. In 2018 and 2019, most of these deaths occurred in the woman's home, which indicates that they were committed by an intimate partner or other family member. Black women and women under age 24 are at particularly high risk of pregnancy-related homicide (*Nature*, November 12).

GRAVE DISCOVERIES: Israeli archaeologists have uncovered an ancient Byzantine basilica in the southern city of Ashdod. Built in the fourth or fifth century, the church is one of the largest and earliest Christian basilicas found in Israel. And it may also be among the most unusual for the prominence of what appear to be graves of female ministers, with inscriptions dedicated to the Holy Mother Sophronia, Theodosia the deaconess, Gregoria the deaconess, and others. In searching the graves researchers also uncovered the remains of bodies that had been unceremoniously dumped in and covered in lime sometime in the sixth century, indicating a possible plague. One archaeologist described the church as a huge cemetery (*Haaretz*, November 15).

FLIPPING PRISONS: A decline in mass incarceration in the United States since its height in 2008 has led to the question of what to do with prisons that are no longer in use. While some have been "flipped" into museums, hotels, and distilleries, advocates for restorative justice are working to turn former prisons into nonhierarchical spaces that host community services and cultural gatherings. North Carolina's Wagram Correctional Facility, for instance, is being transformed into a working farm where at-risk boys are offered work training, mentoring, and recreation opportunities. Prison flipping projects rely heavily on the input of local communities in order to avoid reproducing the social inequities that undergird the incarceration system (*Bloomberg*, November 9).

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"I can't remember—do I work at home or do I live at work?"

GENEROUS FAITH: Muslims in the United States gave an estimated $4.3 billion to charity in 2020, giving at higher rates than the general population to both religious and nonreligious causes. Common areas of giving for Muslims include houses of worship, domestic and international relief, and civil rights protections. "When you're a small community that is under attack and you're trying to make things happen, you have to punch above your weight," said study coauthor Shariq Siddiqui (*Chronicle of Philanthropy*, November 1).

FUNDRAISING FOLLY: The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood sent a fundraising email criticizing Beth Allison Barr's book *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* and attacking her struggling Baptist church in Elm Mott, Texas, for using the word *Godself* instead of *himself*. But the complementarian group's effort backfired, resulting instead in more than $6,500 in donations to the church. "We are overwhelmed, humbled & in awe of you," Barr tweeted (RNS, November 11).

RE-REVISED: An updated edition of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, to be published in May 2022, includes thousands of changes in language, such as "enslaved woman" instead of "slave woman" and "magi" instead of "wise men." A verse that referred to "demoniacs, epileptics and paralytics," now reads "people possessed by demons or having epilepsy or afflicted with paralysis." The updated edition is the result of a commission of the Society of Biblical Literature by the National Council of Churches, which publishes the NRSV. Jim Winkler, NCC president, said the update's attention to accuracy and clarity exceeded expectations (RNS, November 17).

REPATRIATED ART: On November 10, France returned 26 cultural artifacts that had been looted from Benin in 1892. It's the largest restitution France has made to a nation it once colonized, but it barely scratches the surface. Benin has asked that 5,000 works of art be returned—and experts believe that 90 percent of Africa's cultural heritage is currently being held in European museums (CNN Style, November 12).

DAM SMART: Hydroelectric dams are being built around the world, especially in lower-income nations. But along with cheap green power, new dams create significant harm: flooded habitats, major changes to river chemistry, displaced people. Baylor University ecologist Ryan McManamay has a better idea. Most existing dams don't produce any power at all; they were built for other reasons. So why not retrofit them with turbines to create energy? In a paper, McManamay and his coauthors estimate that upgrading dams in the Amazon River basin in South America could create as much energy as 17 new, smaller dams. In the Mekong River basin in Southeast Asia, upgrades could generate enough power to eliminate the need for any new dams at all (*Wired*, November 16) .

BUILD BACK BETTER? Ken Ham, founder of the Creation Museum and the Ark Encounter, wants to build a replica of the Tower of Babel, though he stresses his intentions are far afield from those of the Old Testament architects. His new Tower of Babel exhibit will help dispel the influence of critical race theory, which he calls an "ungodly idea that we must instruct people to see and judge people based on the melanin level in their skin." Ham says the Tower of Babel story illustrates the true origins of racial diversity and that the new exhibit will combat CRT's "divisive" agenda (*Relevant*, November 11).

CAME FOR THE MUSIC: When Jamie Arnold, rabbi at Congregation Beth Evergreen in Evergreen, Colorado, asked Val Robinson, music director at Zion Temple Church, a predominantly Black congregation in nearby Denver, to share in a music partnership, his goal was simply to create great music. Since then, the two congregations' partnerships have flourished from the pulpit to the street. Members are excited about the connection and hope it will become an example for others. "We have a duty to stand beside people who are being treated in a manner that persecutes," said Beth Evergreen member Anne Wolf (*Colorado Sun*, July 21).

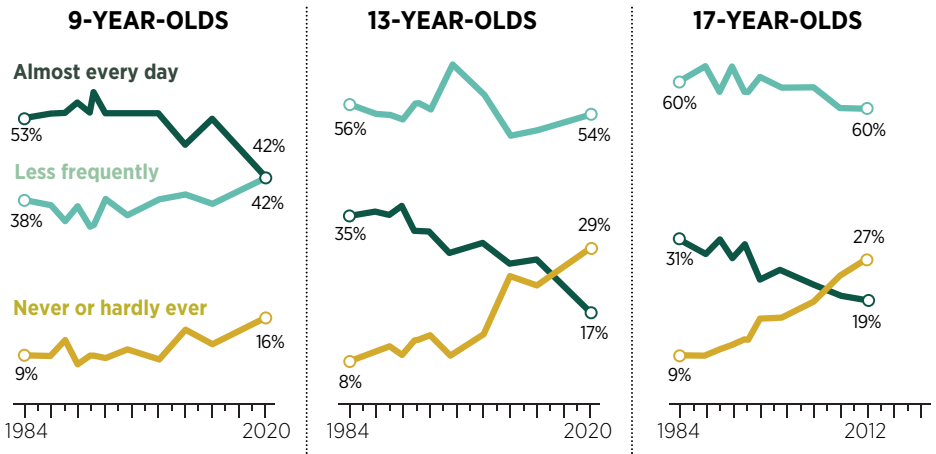
> "Justice denied is a body blow to our national psyche. On trial was not only a killer, but a system that continues to kill. Today that system defeated true justice, once again. But mark these words: We will never stop fighting for what is right and just."
>
> —Actor and author **George Takei** on the Rittenhouse verdict (Twitter, November 19)

> "When Jesus called his disciples he didn't put flyers in the synagogue and put some type of poster in the village square. It was a personal invitation."
>
> — **George Sears**, vocations director for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York, on strategies for identifying and nurturing candidates for priesthood (*Crux*, November 21)

KIDS READING FOR FUN

SOURCE: PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Percentage of US students in each age group who say they read for fun, by year



Note: 2020 assessment was not asked of 17-year-olds. Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100 percent. "Less frequently" combines responses of "once or twice a week," "once or twice a month," and "a few times a year."

A natural, narrow right

by Gunnar Gundersen

ON NOVEMBER 19, Kyle Rittenhouse was acquitted of all charges for killing Joseph Rosenbaum and Anthony Huber and wounding Gaige Grosskreutz in Kenosha, Wisconsin, during the unrest following the police shooting of Jacob Blake last year. Within hours of the verdict, the Heritage Foundation held a question-and-answer session on YouTube, which it promoted with the line, "What is YOUR natural right to self-defense?"

This is not the only attempt to frame what happened in Kenosha through the lens of natural law. As someone who thinks of himself as a natural-law lawyer, I find this troubling. These responses are just another example of how natural law and its expression in the Anglo-American legal tradition—common law—has been deformed by its adaptation to support White supremacy.

Natural law has been deformed by its adaptation to support White supremacy.

At its core, the right to self-defense in common law was based on one's right to use the proportionate amount of force necessary to keep oneself from harm. The amount of force used could be neither disproportionate to the threat faced nor greater than that needed to maintain one's safety. Properly understood, self-defense is not a license to kill; it's a justification for using protective force that may have the unfortunate result of a homicide.

The application was so narrow during the time of King Henry III (1216–1272) that the law would not even allow a defendant to be acquitted on a homicide charge in such a situation. Rather, the defendant would be convicted but then allowed to seek a pardon from the king based on a finding of self-defense. By the time of King Edward I (1272–1307), the jury was the one responsible for reporting the verdict of self-defense to the king—but it still was not allowed to acquit on this basis.

This doctrine also included a key limitation: the person arguing self-defense could not be the one who caused the escalation that led to the need to use deadly force. Simply put, you could not escalate the conflict and then claim a right to defend yourself. This is the corollary of the self-defense doctrine: if the person you killed was defending themselves first, then their right to self-defense takes priority over yours, because you are the aggressor.

On paper, much of this same logic still applies in our written laws today. For example, under section 939.48(2) of the Wisconsin Statutes, the justification of self-defense is not available to a defendant who "engages in unlawful conduct of a type likely to provoke others to attack him" or a "person who provokes an attack, whether by lawful or unlawful conduct with intent to use such an attack as an excuse to cause death or great bodily harm."

But these venerable doctrines—rooted in Christian legal development and meant to enshrine the value of human life and deter the resort to lethal force—have been twisted by White supremacy to serve a whole new need: to justify the use of force against those seeking to vindicate their equal rights. In the mind of the White supremacist, the protest for equal rights is a threatening provocation. Thus, anyone who answers that threat with violence cannot be an aggressor and has the right of self-defense intact.

A person who views a protest for equal rights as a rightful and just assembly, however, will see someone arriving from outside the community with weapons as a provocation, meant to escalate a conflict into deadly violence.

This is a contrast we see within the church as well. Just last year, Catholic priest James Altman sought to diminish lynching as merely capital punishment improperly carried out. In his telling, the White communities behind lynching were simply reacting with a kind of collective self-defense to Black men having the audacity to walk free. That freedom, in the mind of White supremacy, is itself an act of aggression that diminishes culpability for—or even justifies—the White violence that follows.

In Kenosha, Blake, a Black man, was the victim of excessive police violence. Other citizens, exercising their natural and First Amendment rights to defend Blake and themselves from further police violence, staged protests. Rittenhouse, a resident of Illinois, then appeared on the scene with a gun, which he used to kill two protesters and injure another. A worldview that allows for a self-defense acquittal in this case is one that must consider it reasonable for a boy to appear, armed, at the scene of (and in opposition to) a protest against police brutality. It is a worldview that

Century illustration

views those advocating for equal rights as unjust aggressors. It is a worldview that knows the peace being disturbed is that of White supremacy.

Sadly, this is the worldview that was crafted this month, in court and in conservative media.

It is this fundamental disagreement, on who constitutes the aggressor in the wider social context, that is driving the different reactions we are seeing to this case. It is why some people can see Rittenhouse as a hero, a shining example of self-defense. And it is why so many Black people and their allies are heartbroken, recognizing what the acquittal reveals about the broader legal and social landscape: to be free and Black and to support Black freedom are still acts of aggression in America.

In common law, freedom and life were so sacred that an individual had a right to resist arrest—even lawful arrest. Unlawful arrest could always be resisted, while lawful arrest could be resisted if it involved excessive force. The police were not free to place their authority or mission above human life. That changed in the 1950s and '60s, however, just as African Americans began a new push for freedom to exist and move in public space—often leading to arrest.

Many of the same people who see self-defense in the Rittenhouse case have argued that Black people deserve to be shot when exercising their ancient right in common and natural law to resist arrest, a right rooted in the right to self-defense. These (usually White) people tend to think of themselves as conservatives, and they may even think they

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Gunnar Gundersen is an attorney in Newport Beach, California, and the first Ordinariate member of the Knights of Peter Claver. This article was originally published in the Black Catholic Messenger*, an online media outlet by and for African American Catholics. Used by permission.*

are upholding natural law and Anglo-American common law traditions. But the truth is the opposite.

Ultimately, the Rittenhouse case has nothing to do with the natural right to self-defense or venerable common law traditions. It has everything to do with what you believe is the proper social order of the United States. And it is a sad state of affairs when a venerable legal tradition is manipulated and destroyed to maintain White supremacy. Rather than uphold the rule of law, I fear this verdict has continued this country's relativistic descent into a social reality cut off completely from those legal and philosophical traditions and rights that really are the birthright of all Americans. CC

Royal Christmas movies and what they're up to

Who gets chosen?

by Catherine Hervey

IN 2017, someone at Netflix tweeted from the streaming platform's account about its new Christmas offering: "To the 53 people who've watched *A Christmas Prince* every day for the past 18 days: Who hurt you?"

The tweet sparked a news cycle's worth of internet outrage, mostly centered on the creepiness of Netflix's data capturing and subsequent public sharing, however anonymized, and not on the sentiment of the tweet itself. Perhaps many of us would agree that if you're watching a movie like *A Christmas Prince* every day for more than two weeks, something isn't right.

A Christmas Prince was successful enough to prompt two sequels: *A Christmas Prince: The Royal Wedding* and *A Christmas Prince: The Royal Baby*, released for the holiday seasons of 2018 and 2019. Netflix added another royal Christmas franchise in 2018 with *The Princess Switch*, the third of which came out in 2021, which also brought *A Castle for Christmas*.

Netflix certainly didn't start this royal Christmas trend, though it dove in with both feet. The Hallmark Channel produced what is perhaps the first in the genre with *A Princess for Christmas* in 2011, and it has been the most prolific in producing similar titles since, following up with *A Royal Christmas*, *Crown for Christmas*, and *Christmas at the Palace*.

The Hallmark Christmas film in general has become a relatively well-known genre in American television. The channel itself has religious roots, having originally been shared by two religious broadcasters before being purchased by Hallmark, which "synergized" content with Hallmark Cards, working to become the cable channel most associated with celebration. The most culturally famous of these Hallmark "celebrations" is the annual Countdown to Christmas, in which the royal Christmas movie has become a strong subgenre.

But what exactly is it about the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ that says "tiara romance," and why do so many people seem to want it so much?

Royal Christmas movies mostly adhere to a general set of principles. There's an unassuming (White) American woman with as ordinary a life as possible, and there's a (White) prince from a nonexistent country in Central Europe called Aldovia or Balemont or Belgravia or Castlebury, where everyone speaks with a British accent. (Presumably it would feel too odd and tasteless to set one of these films in England itself.) There's a power-hungry aristocratic love rival or an upcoming loveless arranged marriage; there's probably a ball on Christmas Eve. And wow, is it *Christmas*. I might not be exaggerating when I say that some of these movies have a Christmas tree in every frame. In *The Princess Switch*, there's even a Christmas tree in the stables.

But these poinsettia explosions are Christian only in the vaguest possible sense. There's the occasional angel in disguise, manipulating events to throw the protagonist in the way of the prince, and there are some moments of cultural signaling. In *Christmas with a Prince*, when a beautiful hospital pediatrician challenges the chief medical officer about children being moved to accommodate the privacy of a European prince who's been injured in a skiing accident, she protests that it's Christmas, that the children deserve to stay in their own rooms. The villainous chief medical officer's response? "We say happy holidays, Doctor."

The religiosity of the holiday is too ill-defined to account for the vast Christian audience appeal of these films. Maybe it's the well-worn, overwhelming Whiteness of the European fairy tale that we find so comforting, though we are less comfortable acknowledging it. It is so easy to take no notice of the exclusivity of the

Frances Rose McIver and Ben Lamb in *A Christmas Prince* (Netflix)

proposition—or of my own latent willingness to accept every one of the structures and tropes of a royal Christmas movie as a chance to imagine, for a couple of hours, that I could be the one.

Back when I was at Episcopal summer camp, my counselor decorated the cabin wall with a drawing of a girl sitting on a bench surrounded by the words "My father is the King of Kings and that makes me a princess." What, I wondered as I saw this drawing every day on my way to the shower, was the point of being a princess if every other woman on earth was one, too? My faith had not taught me that my culture's conception of feminine value—beauty, desirability, the love of a man—was wrong but simply that God was its true bestower. By this time in my life, I had hung a poster of Prince William's face on my closet door and developed a habit of standing in my driveway while playing the Spice Girls' "Viva Forever" on my Discman, facing what I believed to be the general direction of England. I had more concrete aspirations.

The fairy tale is the story of the one who gets chosen; everyone else remains a peasant. Their drudgery, however marginally ameliorated by your benevolence, continues. Only one woman can marry the crown prince of Fake Britain. To become a princess is to be imbued with value. Gems, gowns, and castles all indicate that the one who wears or inhabits them is the one worthy to do so.

What exactly is it about the birth of Jesus that says "tiara romance"?

The *only* one. Those are low odds for the women of the world. Given that every single one of these value-bestowing princes is White, and most of the would-be princesses are, too, the vision narrows even further.

But the story of the incarnation (to which these movies claim, however blandly, to owe their existence) is the story of every one of us being chosen. It is a vision not of one raised to the greatest heights of power and value but of the heights themselves dissolving, of royalty stripped and lowered to the absolute depths of human experience. The crown gone, the kingdom unacknowledged, the deference nonexistent. The power diffused on the winds of the earth, leaving only the starkest vulnerability imaginable. *That* is the royal Christmas love story of the King of Heaven.

Watching two of these movies as an adult, I noticed the problematic structures and implications, but I also remembered standing in my driveway as a preteen with an earnest desire: *Choose me*. Tell me I am more than I seem, you whom no one would dare contradict, you whose favor, once secured, must be acknowledged by everyone who ever made me feel like I wasn't important.

Awkwardly, that is not what God offers. In the incarnation, God offers me nothing but that which is offered to everyone. By taking comfort in a narrative so diametrically opposed to this one, we perhaps betray an ambivalence, a preference for the remote possibility of finding our way to the top of the world over a reality that upends the hierarchical foundations of the universe itself. Understandable, perhaps. But it's worth at least noting that it isn't only a fictional Europe we're repopulating with our own myopic desires—it's Christmas itself. CC

Catherine Hervey has an MFA in fiction from the Sewanee School of Letters.

Judge tosses convictions in killing of Malcolm X

More than half a century after the assassination of Malcolm X, two of his convicted killers were exonerated after decades of doubt about who was responsible for the civil rights icon's death.

On November 18, Manhattan judge Ellen Biben dismissed the convictions of Muhammad Aziz and the late Khalil Islam after prosecutors and the men's lawyers said a renewed investigation found new evidence that the men were not involved with the killing and determined that authorities withheld some of what they knew.

"The event that has brought us to court today should never have occurred," Aziz told the court. "I am an 83-year-old man who was victimized by the criminal justice system."

He and Islam, who maintained their innocence from the start in the 1965 killing at Upper Manhattan's Audubon Ballroom, were paroled in the 1980s. Islam died in 2009.

AP PHOTO, FILE

Malcolm X in 1963

Malcolm X gained national prominence as the voice of the Nation of Islam, exhorting Black people to claim their civil rights "by any means necessary." Near the end of Malcolm X's life, he split with the Black Muslim organization and, after a trip to Mecca, started speaking about the potential for racial unity. It earned him the ire of some in the Nation of Islam who saw him as a traitor.

He was shot to death while beginning a speech on February 21, 1965. He was 39.

Aziz and Islam, then known as Norman 3X Butler and Thomas 15X Johnson, and a third man were convicted of murder in March 1966. They were sentenced to life in prison.

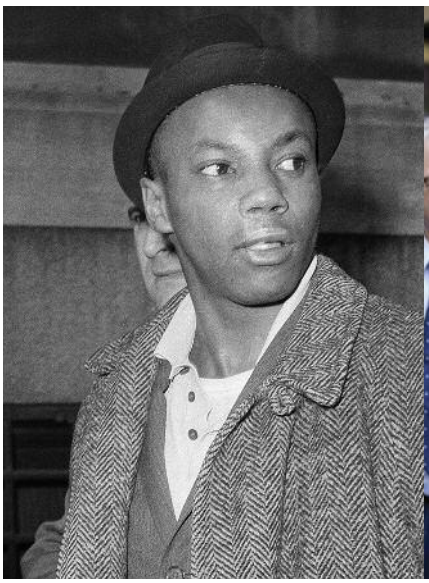
The third man, Mujahid Abdul Halim—also known as Talmadge X Hayer and Thomas Hagan—admitted to shooting Malcolm X but said neither Aziz nor Islam was involved. The two offered alibis, and no physical evidence linked them to the crime.

Halim was paroled in 2010. He identified some other men as accomplices, but no one else has ever been held accountable for the crime.

The reinvestigation found that the FBI and police hid evidence of Aziz's and Islam's innocence from prosecutors. Innocence Project cofounder Barry Scheck, one of the lawyers for Aziz and for Islam's family, called it part of a plot to disrupt the Black civil rights movement.

"There is one ultimate conclusion: Mr. Aziz and Mr. Islam were wrongfully

AP PHOTO, FILE



AP PHOTO / SETH WENIG

***JUSTICE DELAYED:** Muhammad Aziz* **(left)** *is escorted by detectives in New York after his arrest on February 26, 1965, for the killing of Malcolm X. Aziz stands outside the courthouse* **(right)** *with members of his family after his conviction was vacated on November 18.*

convicted of this crime," and there is no prospect of retrying the 56-year-old case, said Manhattan district attorney Cyrus Vance Jr. He apologized for law enforcement's "serious, unacceptable violations of law and the public trust."

The NYPD and the FBI said that they had cooperated fully with the reinvestigation. NYPD Chief of Patrol Juanita Holmes said she felt for Malcolm X's family and for Aziz and Islam "if we are responsible for withholding information."

"I hope that we never revisit a scenario like this again," she added.

Attorneys, scholars, and others have long raised questions about the convictions, and alternate theories and accusations have swirled around the case. After Netflix aired the documentary series *Who Killed Malcolm X?* early last year, Vance's office said it was taking a fresh look at the case.

But the prospect is clouded by the passage of time. Every eyewitness who testified at the trial has died, and all the physical evidence—including a shotgun used in the killing—is gone, as are any phone records that might have existed, Vance said. —Michael R. Sisak and Jennifer Peltz, Associated Press

New study examines how COVID has changed churches

A new study from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research provides a look at the state of churches in the wake of the ongoing pandemic.

The study surveyed 2,074 churches from 38 denominations this summer and, according to Scott Thumma, the study's principal investigator, showed that "the pandemic had a profound impact across the religious spectrum, and that some churches are faring better than others."

Thumma, in an interview, said he was surprised that a third of the clergy did not say the last year was their most difficult in ministry.

"You have to wonder, OK, so what year of your ministry was harder than the past year?" he said.

Researchers found that the vast majority of churches—88 percent—suspended in-person worship for some period of time. Most of those churches—93 percent—have now resumed gathering in person.

More than half of the churches in the survey (54 percent) reported that at the pandemic's height they completely halted fellowship events, such as church suppers and picnics.

More than 30 percent saw growth in requests for food assistance, counseling, and spiritual guidance—and a quarter received more requests for financial help. The rise in demand for these community services came as the churches saw an overall decline in the volunteers who might help supply them.

Churches reported that just 15 percent of regular adult attendees were volunteering, a significant drop from prepandemic times, when the Faith Communities Today survey reported that 40 percent of attendees volunteered.

The majority of clergy (62 percent) encouraged church members to get vaccinated, but that stance varied significantly depending on their denominational affiliation.

"Among clergy from historically African American denominations 100% encouraged vaccinations, while 77% of Mainline Protestant clergy, 49% of Catholic/Orthodox clergy and 41% of Evangelical Protestant clergy publicly encouraged their attendees to get vaccinated," the study stated. "Within majority Latino churches from various denominations, 65% of their clergy encouraged the vaccine."

Eight percent of congregations—mostly larger churches—have served as vaccine or test sites.

Researchers found that the pandemic is not affecting churches' attendance equally.

Since 2019, 35 percent of churches saw a decline of 25 percent or more. But 28 percent of congregations said they grew in the past two years, with 18 percent reporting growth of 25 percent or more.

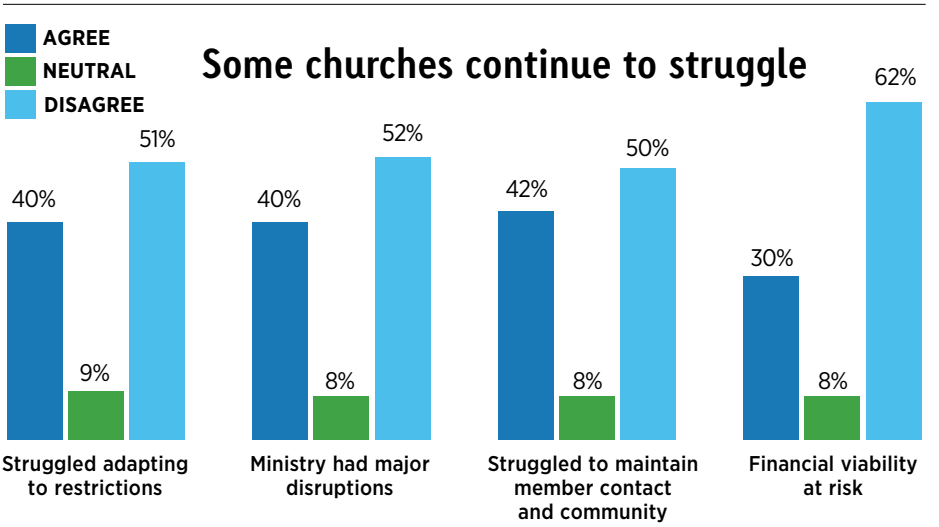
The mode of delivery of worship services was a major factor in whether median attendance increased or fell. For example, the 15 percent of churches that met solely in person saw the steepest decline in attendance—15.7 percent. The 5 percent of congregations that offered only online worship had a decline of 7.3 percent.

But the 80 percent of congregations offering hybrid worship experienced an overall growth of 4.5 percent.

"These congregations tended to be larger with younger clergy, reporting moderate willingness to change, and expressing some struggles to adapt," the study stated. "They also reported the most infections of Covid-19 of staff and members, as well as the most congregational deaths. These congregations represent 60% of Catholic/Orthodox congregations, 62% of Mainline, and 90% of all Evangelical congregations."

Overall, the study found that 17 percent of churches had one or more members die of COVID-19 and 37 percent had at least one staff member test positive for the virus.

The study also found widely varying giving patterns. While four in ten churches saw an increase in giving, another three in ten reported a decline.



HARTFORD INSTITUTE FOR RELIGION RESEARCH

The study, titled *Navigating the Pandemic: A First Look at Congregational Responses*, is the first of a new five-year project led by the institute at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace (formerly known as Hartford Seminary). It is based on a collaboration among 13 denominations from the Faith Communities Today cooperative partnership and institute staffers. —Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service

Women in Argentina claim labor exploitation by Opus Dei

AP PHOTO / NATACHA PISARENKO

SEEKING JUSTICE:** Former Opus Dei domestic workers* **(from left)** ***Lucia Giménez, Alicia Torancio, and Beatriz Delgado pose for a photo in Buenos Aires on October 21. The women have filed a complaint against Opus Dei to the Vatican for alleged labor exploitation and abuses of power and of conscience.

Lucía Giménez still suffers pain in her knees from the years she spent scrubbing floors in the men's bathroom at the Opus Dei residence in Buenos Aires for hours without pay.

Giménez, now 56, joined the conservative Catholic group in her native Paraguay at the age of 14 with the promise she would get an education. But instead of math or history, she was trained in cooking, cleaning, and other household chores to serve in Opus Dei residences and retirement homes.

For 18 years she washed clothes, scrubbed bathrooms, and attended to the group's needs for 12 hours a day, with breaks only for meals and praying. Despite this, she says: "I never saw money in my hands."

Giménez and 41 other women have filed a complaint against Opus Dei to the Vatican for alleged labor exploitation, as well as abuse of power and of conscience. The Argentine and Paraguayan citizens worked for the movement in Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia, Uruguay, Italy, and Kazakhstan between 1974 and 2015.

Opus Dei—"Work of God" in English—was founded by the Spanish priest Josemaría Escrivá in 1928 and has 90,000 members in 70 countries. The lay group was greatly favored by St. John Paul II, who canonized Escrivá in 2002. It has a unique status in the church and reports directly to the pope. Most members are laypeople with secular jobs and families who strive to "sanctify ordinary life." Other members include priests and celibate laypeople.

The complaint alleges that the women, often minors at the time, labored under "manifestly illegal conditions." The women are demanding financial reparations from Opus Dei, an acknowledgment of and apology for the abuses, and punishment of those responsible.

In a statement, Opus Dei said it had not been notified of the complaint to the Vatican but has been in contact with the women's legal representatives to "listen to the problems and find a solution."

The women in the complaint have one thing in common: humble origins. They were recruited and separated from their families between the ages of 12 and 16. In some cases, like Giménez's, they were taken to Opus Dei centers in another country, circumventing immigration controls.

They claim that Opus Dei priests and other members exercised "coercion of conscience" on the women to pressure them to serve and to frighten them with spiritual evils if they didn't comply with the supposed will of God. They also controlled their relations with the outside world.

Most of the women asked to leave as the physical and psychological demands became intolerable. But when they finally did, they were left without money. Many also said they needed psychological treatment after leaving Opus Dei.

The women's complaint, filed in September with the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, also points to dozens of priests affiliated with Opus Dei for their alleged "intervention, participation and knowledge in the denounced events."

The allegations in the complaint are similar to those made by members of another conservative Catholic organization also favored by St. John Paul II, the Legion of Christ. The Legion recruited young women to become consecrated members of its lay branch, Regnum Christi, to work in Legion-run schools and other projects.

Those women alleged spiritual and psychological abuse, of being separated from family and being told their discomfort was "God's will" and that abandoning their vocation would be tantamount to abandoning God.

Pope Francis has been cracking down on 20th-century religious movements after several religious orders and lay groups were accused of sexual and other abuses by their leaders. Opus Dei has so far avoided much of the recent controversy, though there have been cases of individual priests accused of misconduct.

Josefina Madariaga, director of Opus Dei's press office in Argentina, said the women's lawyer informed the group last year of their complaints.

She said that all the people currently "working on site are paid," adding that some 80 women currently work for Opus Dei in Argentina. However, she said, "in the '60s, '70s, '80s, '90s, society as a whole dealt with these issues in a more informal or family way. . . . Opus Dei has made the necessary changes and modifications to accompany the law in force today."

So far, the Vatican has not ruled on the complaint, and it's not clear if it will. A Vatican spokesperson did not immediately respond to a request for information.

If there is no response, the women's legal representatives say they will initiate criminal proceedings for "human trafficking, reduction to servitude, awareness control, and illegitimate deprivation of liberty" against Opus Dei in Argentina and other countries where the women worked.

"They say, 'we are going to help poor people,' but it's a lie; they don't help, they keep (the money) for themselves," Giménez said. "It is very important to achieve some justice." —Débora Rey, Associated Press

Video of UM church incident goes viral, causes fallout

Canceled worship services. Closed Facebook accounts. Extra security at churches.

That's some of the fallout from a viral video showing a Hispanic woman being told to leave a United Methodist church that focuses on prison and addiction recovery ministry.

Staff and volunteers at Oklahoma City's Penn Avenue Redemption United Methodist Church suspected that Ashley Ontiveros—a visitor whose sister is incarcerated in the Oklahoma Department of Corrections and attends worship there—was trying to bring in marijuana during a November 14 service. In the video, she tearfully denies it.

In an interview, Ontiveros said she took and posted the video out of concern that the incident might cause a "write-up" for her sister. "I had to pull my phone out and record that," she said. "I knew it was their word against mine."

The church's pastor, Brad Rogers, said the video only captures part of what he describes as highly disruptive conduct by Ontiveros. He said the posted video also fails to note the church's ministry focus or the rules it must operate under in order to host people from the prison's low-security facilities.

Posted on TikTok on November 14 and widely shared on other social media platforms, the video had more than 4 million views in less than a week and prompted an outpouring of angry comments at the 320-member church.

In response to threats, Penn Avenue Redemption unplugged its office phone and canceled two worship services as a precaution.

The three-minute video is in two parts. The first shows a volunteer demanding Ontiveros leave because of a green leafy substance she brought in a baggie. Ontiveros replies that she has brought cilantro and oregano to be used as a garnish for menudo, a traditional Mexican soup, and offers to let volunteers smell the food as proof.

The conflict escalates until Rogers comes into the scene, identifies himself as pastor, and says he has stopped his sermon because of the disturbance.

A second part of the video shows a calmer Ontiveros speaking to volunteers in the church kitchen. She's trying to retrieve the baggie, but volunteers tell her she can't have it, that it's going to be tested, and that if she wants it back she can contact the police.

Ontiveros said in a later interview that she had been to the church two or three times to bring food for her sister to have at the communal meal after worship.

On this day, she said she had brought a grocery bag with a plate, a cup of menudo, and a baggie of oregano and cilantro, along with carrots, onion, and lemon packaged separately. She said she left the food in the kitchen before sitting with her sister in the sanctuary.

It was after Ontiveros went outside to answer a call from another sister and was walking up the steps to reenter the church, she said, that volunteers accused her of bringing in drugs and asked her to leave.

She decided to leave after trying and failing to retrieve the baggie with the garnish. "On the drive home I was crying," she said. "I had to pull over. I almost had a panic attack."

Rogers said the police were never involved, despite the reference in the video. He said the confiscated baggie was destroyed.

"I had absolutely zero interest in trying to get her in trouble," Rogers said. "That's not what we do here. The only reason we would ever call police is a safety issue."

Rogers said that the Department of Corrections had directed the church to stop allowing visitors to bring food, to minimize the risk of smuggled contraband. He announced the new policy during worship on November 14, saying it would go into effect in December—but he said volunteers were already on high alert.

They saw Ontiveros entering, leaving, and reentering as a red flag. Volunteers spotted what Rogers described as a "leafy green substance" in the baggie and did not believe it was cilantro and oregano, despite Ontiveros's protestations, he said.

Rogers said he felt he that the volunteers dealt with a difficult situation as well as they could.

"I stand by our volunteers 100 percent," he said. The volunteers undergo Department of Corrections training to be able to escort people from the prison into the church for worship, a meal, and a class.

TIK TOK / SCREENGRABS

TikTok videos taken by Ashley Ontiveros show* (left) *Brad Rogers, pastor of Penn Avenue Redemption United Methodist Church in Oklahoma City, addressing Ontiveros, who was accused of bringing marijuana into the church; and* (right) *her interaction with volunteers when she attempted to retrieve items from the church kitchen.

Crystal and Kadesh King were among the Penn Avenue Redemption members who interacted with Ontiveros. The married couple—who met at the church in 2016 as formerly incarcerated people with addiction backgrounds—said they and church colleagues are always careful to abide by Department of Corrections requirements.

"It's a little different from your average Methodist church," Crystal King said. "We have to be on our p's and q's."

Ontiveros remains critical of how Penn Avenue Redemption treated her. But she hopes the negative comments about the church will stop.

"They don't need that," she said. "They've already had enough damage. We all have." —Sam Hodges, United Methodist News Service

In Catholic Italy, 'de-baptism' is gaining popularity

Like most of his fellow Italians, Mattia Nanetti, 25, from the northern city of Bologna, grew up with the teachings and sacraments of the Catholic Church in parochial school.

But in September 2019 he decided the time had come to leave the church behind. He filled out a form that he had found online, accompanying it with a long letter explaining his reasons, and sent everything to the parish in his hometown.

Two weeks later, a note was put next to his name in the parish baptism register, formalizing his abandonment of the Catholic Church, and Nanetti became one of an increasing number of Italians who have been "de-baptized."

Every year in Italy, more and more people choose to go through the simple process, which became available two decades ago at the behest of the Union of Rationalist Atheists and Agnostics (UAAR in Italian).

A lack of data makes it difficult to establish how common the phenomenon is, but some dioceses are keeping track. The Diocese of Brescia, east of Milan, said in its diocesan newspaper in August

PHOTO BY JOSH APPLEGATE ON UNSPLASH

that 75 people asked to be de-baptized in 2021, up from 27 in 2020.

Combining this partial data with activity on a website UAAR recently launched where people can register their de-baptisms, Roberto Grendene, national secretary of the UAAR, said the organization estimates that more than 100,000 people have been de-baptized in Italy.

The church does quibble with the word *de-baptism—sbattezzo* in Italian. Legally and theologically, experts say, this isn't an accurate term.

Daniele Mombelli, vice chancellor of the Diocese of Brescia and professor of religious sciences at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, said it's not possible to "erase the baptism, because it's a fact that historically happened, and was therefore registered."

"What the procedure does is formalize the person's abandonment of the church," said Mombelli.

While agreeing that it is impossible to cancel a baptism, Italy's Personal Data Protection Authority now states that everyone has the right to abandon the church.

The de-baptism is finalized once an applicant declares the intention to leave the church and the decision is registered by the church authorities, normally the local bishop.

The reasons behind de-baptism vary from person to person. But many of the de-baptized described their choice as a matter of "coherence."

Pietro Groppi, a 23-year-old from Piacenza who got de-baptized in May 2021, said that the first question he asked himself before sending his form was "Do I believe or not?" The answer was simply no.

But for many, abandoning the church is a statement against its positions on LGBTQ rights, euthanasia, and abortion.

Nanetti said that being de-baptized helped him affirm his own identity as bisexual. "I had to get distance from some of the church's positions on civil rights matters," he said.

The church's stance on sexuality helped push Groppi to seek out de-baptism as well, though he's not affected personally. He finds the Vatican's position on these matters "absurd," and he's unhappy with how the church meddles with Italian politics.

Francesco Faillace, 22, who is currently going through the de-baptism process, said, "I've been an atheist since basically forever. For the church, being baptized means that you're a Catholic, but that's not the case. I've personally been baptized for cultural reasons more than religious, because that's how it goes in Italy."

Faillace believes that if all the people who don't truly identify as Catholics were to be de-baptized, official percentages of Italian Catholics would be significantly lower.

The latest data seems to back him up. In 2020, sociologist Francesco Garelli conducted a large study financed by the Italian Catholic bishops' conference that concluded that there are 18 million atheists in Italy—about 30 percent of the population.

Grendene, of the UAAR, said many Italians are still unaware of de-baptism as an option. In the past, the association would organize "de-baptism days" to advertise it, he said, but it turns out that the church itself is de-baptism's best promoter.

"Whenever the Vatican is at the center of a controversy, we see the access to our website grows dramatically," said Grendene, pointing out that on two days in June, traffic on the UAAR website went from a daily average of 120 visitors to more than 6,000.

A few days earlier the Vatican had sent a note to the Italian government, asking to change some of the language in a proposed law aimed at criminalizing discrimination based on sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability. —Sara Badilini, Religion News Service

People

COURTESY THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

■ **William Sterling Cary**, a pioneering minister and civil rights activist who was the first Black person in prominent church leadership roles, including president of the National Council of Churches, has died, according to family members. He was 94.

Cary died November 14 at his suburban Chicago home following heart failure stemming from a long illness, his daughter Yvonne Cary Carter said.

Born in 1927 in New Jersey, Cary showed a knack for leadership at a young age and was ordained as a teenager. He attended Atlanta's Morehouse College, where he served as student body president from 1948 to 1949, according to the school.

While he was ordained a Baptist, he served in Presbyterian and United Church of Christ congregations.

In 1972, he became the first Black president of the National Council of Churches. Two years later, he was elected conference minister of the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ (UCC)—the first Black person named a UCC conference minister. He continued to lead the UCC's third-largest conference with nearly 250 churches until his retirement in 1994.

"He was a person who often had that role of being the first and he carried it well. He carried it with distinction," said Bernice Powell Jackson of the First United Church of Tampa, who worked with him. "We all looked up to him. He was articulate, he was forceful."

His advocacy also included challenging the church.

Cary was among dozens of Black pastors who in 1966 penned a searing letter calling out White clergy and others on American race relations and outlining steps for change. It was published on a full page of the *New York Times* and titled "Black Power."

"We, an informal group of Negro churchmen in America, are deeply disturbed about the crisis brought upon our country by historic distortions of important human realities in the controversy about 'black power.' What we see shining through the variety of rhetoric is not anything new but the same old problem of power and race which has faced our beloved country since 1619," the July 31, 1966, statement read.

Family members called Cary, who also went by W. Sterling Cary, a devoted husband and father who loved to grill at family and church gatherings. His wife of 68 years, Marie, called her late husband a "warm, supportive and steadfast" man who "touched thousands of lives around the country."

She also described him as a family man.

"Family and God always came first," she said. —Sophia Tareen, Associated Press

■ **Marvin Olasky**, the longtime editor in chief of *World*, a magazine that has long aimed to pair a conservative Christian viewpoint with careful, detailed reporting, resigned on November 1, effective January 31.

COURTESY OF *WORLD*

Olasky had hoped to end his tenure, which began in 1994, next summer. Those plans changed after *World*'s publisher announced the launch of a new online opinion section, overseen by Albert Mohler, a prominent Southern Baptist seminary president known for his conservative commentary.

The decision to start the new World Opinions was made without Olasky's approval. He viewed the decision as a no-confidence vote by the board of God's World Publications Inc., the magazine's parent organization. Other key *World* staffers joined Olasky in resigning. All were concerned that the new opinion section, which focuses on conservative political and cultural views, would overshadow *World*'s commitment to reporting.

Kevin Martin, CEO of the World News Group, declined to speak about internal decision making at the organization. He did say the magazine staff will continue to do in-depth reporting and will retain editorial independence.

Olasky praised the magazine staff who remain at *World*, as well as all the other people who make the journalism at the magazine possible. He said he plans to continue as dean of the World Journalism Institute, where he has long trained young journalists.

In an interview, Olasky said he remains hopeful about the future of *World*, of America, and of the Christian church. "I have learned, both from history and from my own personal experience, not to underestimate what God can do," he said. —Bob Smietana, Religion News Service

■ **Bryan Massingale** accepted the Isaac Hecker Award for Social Justice from the Paulist Center on November 13. Massingale, a Catholic priest and theological ethicist, was given the award for his work toward justice and inclusion for Black and LGBTQ people in the Catholic Church.

COURTESY OF FORDHAM UNIVERSITY

Previous recipients of the award include Dorothy Day, Cesar Chavez, and Helen Prejean.

In a statement, the Paulist Center said that for more than four decades Massingale had "addressed these twin bases of discrimination," calling him a modern prophet.

Massingale is the author of *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, widely considered to be the preeminent book on Catholicism and anti-Black racism. He currently teaches ethics at Fordham University, where he also serves as the senior ethics fellow for the school's Center for Ethics Education.

In his acceptance speech, Massingale said he appreciated the recognition of both of his ministries—antiracism and LGBTQ inclusion. "So often, in my experience, one or the other is recognized or accepted."

Earlier this year, Massingale also received Pax Christi USA's Teacher of Peace Award for being a "voice of reason and leadership that is needed to guide us through these turbulent times." —Dawn Araujo-Hawkins

LIVING BY The Word

December 24/25, Nativity of the Lord
Isaiah 52:7–10; John 1:1–14

ONE YEAR, desperate for a striking story for my Christmas Eve sermon, I hid away from the children and the in-laws and tore through an Advent devotional. The vignette that grabbed my attention first caught it in a sour way. The author described a Christmas when she was given an unexpected, overwhelmingly generous gift: close friends offered her enough money to live on for a year so she could devote her time to writing. They believed in her and her work. With that gift of time, Harper Lee went on to write *To Kill a Mockingbird.*

It's a striking story, but I was annoyed. This is what Christmas means to Harper Lee? The biggest, most shocking gift she'd ever received, born of deep friendship, simple love, and faith in her value and potential? Good for her, I thought, but the last thing people need when they're reaching out for something beyond the present-laden tree is one more Christmas morning fairy tale.

Then it slowly dawned on me. This is the beginning arc and the foundational heart of the Christian tale: the gift of the Word made flesh, the grounds of our joy and celebration, trees and presents and all. A new life of deep intimacy with God, freely given—as gift, as grace. We are worth more to God than we ever imagined. We are worth the risk and sacrifice involved. "I can't believe it!" the shocked recipients cry.

The accoutrements of the holiday season can blind and distract us in many ways, but mostly this obfuscation works when we forget to look beneath the symbols, whether we are enjoying or resisting them. What is the story within the story that we need to hear anew? The light in the darkness. The secret-surprise gift, a baby-then-boy-then-man on the fringes. The raising up and drawing in of the humble and lowly.

The chapter of salvation history that begins with the nativity of Christ is a story of God's extravagant love and generosity. We are still heirs of this striking, good-faith offering, living in a long and ongoing period marked by the unearned invitation to accept liberation, support, and partnership with God. Can we, as Brené Brown puts it, stop "hustling for our worthiness," accept the holy check of our ultimate value on offer, and begin living as beloved and fruitful members of God's household? What will we write with our lives? What work is on our hearts that is impossible without such grace?

Forget the debates about the virgin birth for a minute, the tired skepticism about pageant narratives. The true source of doubt (or worse, certainty) in our time is that we have trouble believing in such divine generosity—or human worthiness. The Christmas leap of faith centers on this gaping hole of a question: Who can believe that the strange creatures we see in the mirror and on the street are worth the trouble to God? The pandemic has greatly reduced our estimation of ourselves and of the whole human race. To understand that we are not as good as we thought we were—to be humble—can be healthy ground for holy cultivation. But just as too much fertilizer can destroy tender seeds, too much of this dark judgment can kill the seeds of faith needed for renewal of life. We know anew that we are not the light, but that does not mean the light has abandoned us, or that we cannot testify to the light that the darkness of the pandemic has not overcome.

In September I gathered with a small group of women from my church to tell our pandemic "spiritual autobiographies." The darkness was deep, and tears transcended the lag time of translation across language differences. A devoted mother of six didn't know how she could help her children with online learning when she cannot read. A grandmother said her COVID anxiety had been completely eclipsed by the sudden deaths of her son and grandson. A recently divorced woman was enduring cancer treatment on her own. A young mother had spent time in a behavioral health unit for anxiety. A widow had just buried her husband of more than five decades.

What is the story within the story that we need to hear anew?

And yet all of them, in their own languages and words, said this: God answered when I cried out in prayer and desperation. God loved me through other people. God loved me when I was all alone. God is the only one holding me together, the only one who can hold me. It is very hard, but God is with me.

"What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." Each woman's story was a witness to the ongoing nativity gift, and as we gathered for a closing prayer, my heart sang with Isaiah. This is an Isaiah 52 Christmas if we've ever seen one: "Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted his people." I could not be with these women in person for much of the pandemic. But they could perceive the light of God with them, in them, holding them in chaotic storms like beloved children enduring a long nightmare. They received the gifts of faith and held them tight. Their ongoing work in the world is as beautiful and impressive to me as *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

The true light came into the world, and has not given up on us yet. Because apparently we are worth more than we know. Each nativity, we testify to this extravagant, ever-surprising gift.

December 26, First Sunday after Christmas Day
Colossians 3:12–17; Luke 2:41–52

A SUDANESE AMERICAN parishioner of mine had recently received word that her father had died suddenly in Juba. Expecting shock and sadness, I sat with Achol and tried to get a sense of the current family landscape. Instead, she took the lead in the conversation and gently led me back in time, introducing me to a "holy and beloved" man, an irrigation technician and farmer, a father clothed in love. Her series of stories and descriptions might as well have been scripted on this week's Colossians reading, virtue by virtue, though Achol spoke only from the script of her remembrance.

"He was a very good father," she said. "He always sat with us for meals and talked with us. Unlike many of the men who would always be out with their friends playing dominoes, he was home." I heard simple devotion and was glad for her. But then, this: "When we got in trouble, he would never curse or yell or let his mouth get away from him. He would talk to us calmly about what we had done wrong, instructing us." A meek, gentle, kind man, I thought. How lucky she was. No wonder her own spirit and temperament are so gracious.

But the layers of beautiful Christlike clothing kept coming into view. "He refused to take a second wife, even though that was very normal. Even my mom used to tease him and beg him, 'Get a second wife to help me and to help you!'" Achol laughed. He wouldn't do it; he wanted to build a family another way. He would sacrifice the status gained from a bigger family. "And it's probably hard for you to understand, but back home there are things men simply don't do. They think it is their right not to do it. But he helped my mom a lot, almost every day. He would go to the market for her, to buy groceries. 'What would you like?' he would ask her each morning." He did not take the entitlements afforded to him by his status and culture—a living picture of humility in relationship.

Then the lens shifted to outside the family, and the colors only grew richer. "His best friend got tuberculosis, and even his wife abandoned him for fear of getting sick. But my father took care of him as his friend died, bathing him and feeding him. Here we have all the protective equipment, but not there. With his bare hands, he did what his friend needed." The colors of compassion and courage emerged in vivid array. Finally, she told me about her father's patience and peace. "When the war came to our town of Renk, bullets were flying and people were panicking, running away. But he told us to stay in our home and wait until it was quieter to move. He was right. My younger sister, just 12 or 13 years old, didn't listen, though, and she ran off in the chaos. After we were safe he went out into the jungle and found her on the third day, alive."

Achol's family had been mourning this remarkable man in true Colossians fashion: with gratitude in their hearts, praying and singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. "Most of all, he taught us the word of God," she said. "Oh, he couldn't read," she clarified, after I suggested the image of a father reading scripture with his family. "The war disrupted his education. He learned the word from a young age from people who used to come and sit in the house, sharing stories and teaching." He passed it on within his family. Achol reads Arabic beautifully, but I have always been impressed by her hermeneutic of love when discussing scripture—she obviously learned the essence of God's word away from the page, in part from a man who couldn't read the name Christ yet chose to clothe himself in Christ's love.

Why was I so surprised to hear that her father learned the faith he lived so well "only" through oral teaching? I know that this is how most Christians have done it throughout history. Yes, I exist within a literacy-centric framework. But beyond this easy answer lies a darker Protestant and postmodern prejudice: skepticism about learning at the feet of others. As a pastor and parent, I act on the belief that instruction in the faith is essential to the spiritual journey. But how much has an individualistic, pave-your-own-way-to-the-heart-of-God worldview crept in?

In Luke 2, another preteen lost to his anxious parents is found alive on the third day. He is sitting among religious teachers—he *must* be, he says—in his "father's house" or about his "father's business," depending on the translation. The contemporary church has decentered the house and emphasized the business. Yet it was essential even for Jesus to sit with teachers, learning in community from elders (even as he surprised them with his wisdom). We rightly acknowledge with Mary that we cannot presume to know where Jesus is or should be. But Luke's account of the temple stands against our temptation to prematurely proclaim that Jesus has left the building for good—that God's only "real" business is out in the world. There is a necessary time for learning, just as there is for action.

St. Teresa of Ávila describes the second dwelling place in *The Interior Castle*, where we encounter Christ, as those times in our life when Jesus primarily speaks to us through the words of others farther along the path. Sermons, books, and conversation are traditional house-of-God means of understanding what God's business in the world is about. We never know what manner of life might be born from an intentional circle of sacred stories, honest questions, and holy witness.

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January 6, Epiphany of the Lord
Ephesians 3:1–12; Matthew 2:1–12

MY HUSBAND AND I started our ministry with our congregation in summer 2016, but in those hot, sun-drenched early months we kept hearing the language of the Epiphany. The church's primary matriarch, Suzy, told the church's story as the story of keeping the light of Christ burning, visible to any wanderers or travelers seeking his presence, even if the size of the flame was modest. The small congregation was rich in faith but poor in budget, and the darkness of potential closure loomed. With minimal pastoral leadership, Suzy and other lay leaders kept the light of Christ aflame in the most unglamorous of ways: arriving early to clean the bathrooms, running upstairs to sing in the choir, running back downstairs to steep the chai tea spices before the service ended, mopping the floors and resetting the tables for another week of recovery group meetings. Many of the leaders came straight from working a night shift, painfully delaying sleep.

"We just had to keep the light going. We couldn't let it go out on our watch," Suzy said. Only God knows how many souls encountered Christ's gracious light on those hard-pressed Sundays, but I stand as one witness: when we visited the church for the first time, a Sudanese elder placed her hand on my back as I knelt at the communion rail, and I experienced it as the hand of Christ. Two years later, I sat in her living room and told her this story, a pivotal part of my vocational discernment at the time. "You probably don't remember," I said. She looked me straight in the eye and said, "I remember. I meant it as a blessing." Christ's light, manifest to the stranger. Small but mighty, hidden to the world in a run-down cinder block building.

The manifestation of Christ to the gentiles is celebrated throughout the season of Epiphany, but Matthew 2 is the dramatic and tone-setting lead. At first glance the Epiphany seems high and mighty, with grand images fit for plays and movies and Christmas cards: royal courts, wise men from the East, the capital's chief priests and legal advisers, new stars on the move, secret delegations. Big, important people at the center of the world. But then, at the climax of the passage, when "they saw that the star had stopped" and "were overwhelmed with joy," the colors are more muted and the stage setting becomes sparse.

We see only "the child, with Mary his mother." The holy family has moved from a stable to the stability of a house, but there is little to indicate the identity Matthew points to in these verses: king of the Judeans, the anointed deliverer, one who will lead and shepherd. The passage reminds us four times that Jesus is a *child*. Yet somehow these wise men respond as if Jesus' greatness is indeed manifest to them.

How do they know that the glory of the Lord is upon this small child? A compelling star. How do they know not to return to Herod? An alarming dream. How does Paul become the apostle to this child-turned-man? A revelation of "the mystery of Christ" on the road. How does the young church know that this risen Christ is for the whole world? It has been revealed by the Spirit (Eph. 2:5–6). All this wondrous activity makes me think about the miscommunications between the world and the church when it comes to signs and wonders.

The "gentiles" of my millennial generation are generally big on wonder and intrigued by astrology, dreams, and synchronicity. A popular banner for baby nurseries among my friends quotes Vincent van Gogh to a new generation of soft transcendentalists: "I don't know anything with certainty, but the sight of the stars makes me dream." At my city's children's museum, the most popular exhibit is the Wonder Sound, an elaborate playhouse filled with ethereal music and keywords among the spiritual-but-not-religious: dream, listen, ponder. None of those words are anti-religious, but they seem pitched in opposition to a shadowy dogmatism, past or present. God is absent from the walls for many reasons, but I imagine one of them is that God-talk has become synonymous with certainty, and theology is not popularly understood to be a landscape where dreams are welcome. Taking direction from the universe or nature is often assumed to be missing in Christianity.

I grew up singing "We Three Kings" in a mainline church, but somehow I gathered that it was un-Christian to think that stars or nature had anything to say to us. My tradition is not defensively allergic to a whiff of astrology, but our enlightenment lineage often places our teaching and preaching discourse above such subjective, woo-woo mediums, in the realm of empiricism and reason. It seems the church has resisted exploring signs and wonders from God in everyday life. Rationalism and subtle materialism stifle such conversation in our liberal circles, while among conservatives a culture of certainty and concerns over source purity constrain theological exploration.

Yet on Epiphany, our scriptures invite us all to reconsider *how* Christ was manifest to the gentiles then, and how we might witness to the same light in concert with those stories now. Some of that witness—and the wondrous, God-given signs—will come through humble and familiar church work, like an altar candle kept burning, like Suzy's faithfulness. Other hearts might more readily approach the flame of Christ's presence among us, like the wise men stumbling step by step toward Bethlehem, if we can more fully communicate what even the Puritan Jonathan Edwards knew: that God ceaselessly reveals himself "alike by his word and works" in nature.

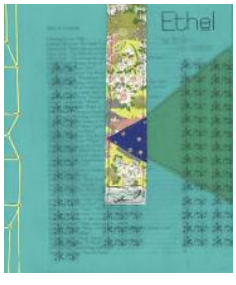
The author is Laurel Mathewson*, co-vicar at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in San Diego.*

PERIODICAL PRESENTS

This Christmas, CC staff members are giving people print subscriptions.

For the friend whose spirituality is deeply invested in ecology—and we should all be getting there, even if we're late to the party—***EcoTheo Review*** publishes original essays, reviews, poetry, and art that enliven the conversation between faith and environmental justice. Founded at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2013, the literary journal has grown into a collective, a conference, and the Starshine and Clay Fellowship, which supports emerging Black poets with publication and mentorship.

For the friend who is southern and sick of southern stereotypes (that's me; I'm the friend), the ***Bitter Southerner*** challenges the narrative with writing and reportage that are by turns difficult and delightful, critical and celebratory. Writers and artists explore the myths and tropes of southern life—often turning them inside out, always pushing for what the magazine calls a "better South." To go with your gift subscription, you could also pick up something from the *Bitter Southerner*'s general store—like the coffee-table book *Waffle House Vistas*, a screen-printed tea towel from artist Courtney Garvin, an "abide no hatred" pride flag, or a "good trouble" graphic tee in honor of civil rights hero John Lewis.



For the whimsical friend who loves to support work made by women's hands, ***Ethel*** is both a twice yearly, limited edition zine of writing and art and a micropress specializing in handmade chapbooks. Each issue is a delight to read, hold, and see on your bookshelf—and every single copy is hand sewn with love by cofounder Sara Lefsyk.

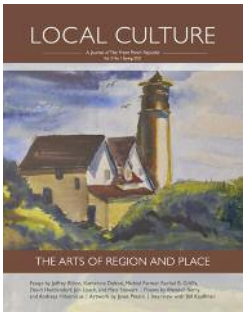
And finally, for the old-school social justice warrior in your life, why not go back to the source? The ***Catholic Worker*** newspaper has been afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted since it was founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in 1933. Still only a penny an issue and never online, you'll have to write to them to request your print subscription for a whopping $0.25. (They also accept donations.)

—Jessica Mesman, associate editor

A pet peeve of mine is the assumption that American political thought exists between two binary poles. It's as if the two-party system controls not just our governance but our wider political imagination as well. When I hear this from someone, I'm tempted to respond with a rant about the great variety of political thought in this country. I really should just buy them a magazine subscription instead.

The self-proclaimed "world's first socialist-feminist glossy magazine" has a perfect title: ***Lux***. It's a name that both honors the revolutionary socialist Rosa Luxemburg and evokes a sense of indulgence. "Contra stereotypes about socialism," write the editors, "we believe in abundance *for all*." Two issues into its short life, the magazine has tackled a variety of fascinating subjects that each, in its way, challenges the notion that American leftists have to choose between cultural priorities and economic ones. It also looks fantastic—a sly subversion of a consumer-driven women's magazine.

A perennial question for leftist radicals is if and when to make common cause with mainstream liberals. It might be an easier sell if mainstream liberalism were shaped by the ***American Prospect***, which embodies a progressivism that's for economic equality, labor rights, industrial policy, and social welfare. When *TAP* was founded in 1989, these priorities were out of fashion in the Democratic Party. That's changed somewhat, but unions remain weak and inequality keeps growing. This magazine's savvy advocacy and engaging writing are as vital as ever.

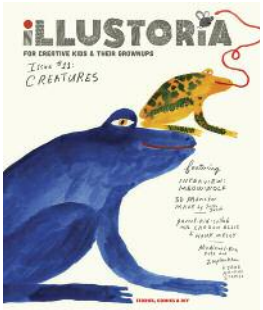


Like the socialist *Lux* and the labor-oriented *TAP*, the ***Front Porch Republic*** has a lot invested in social solidarity. Its politics are quite different, however: the online publication and its print journal, ***Local Culture***, are focused on localism, voluntary association, and organic community. The front porch is a borderland between public and private space writ small, and *FPR* explores the way such liminal spaces are essential to democracy. While it's true that localism sometimes betrays a xenophobic shadow side (see "Homegrown nationalism," Aug. 25), that hardly negates localism's witness to our unrooted, displaced contemporary existence. *FPR*'s resistance to social atomization, economic centralization, and cultural homogenization has much to say to conservatives, to liberals, and to those of us who find that binary distinction simplistic and tiresome.

—Steve Thorngate, managing editor

There are many magazines that I wish I could read on a regular basis, so this year I'm giving gift subscriptions to the people I live with. My husband, for instance, is getting ***Nautilus***, an artsy, philosophical science magazine that publishes a nicely designed print edition every other month. The writing is great—Cormac McCarthy's nonfiction debut was in *Nautilus*—and the topics are diverse. (How much are our perceptions of dinosaurs shaped by capitalism? A lot, it turns out.)

My younger daughter is getting ***Kazoo***, an "ad-free, indie magazine for girls, 5 to 12, that celebrates them for being strong, smart, fierce and true to themselves." Created in Brooklyn and printed in Vermont on recycled paper, each quarterly issue is filled with colorful puzzles, stories, comics, games, interviews, crafts, and enough subtle humor to keep adults entertained as they read it with their children.



My older daughter is receiving ***Illustoria***, a gorgeous triannual magazine for creative children age 6 to 12 that encourages the expression of ideas through storytelling and art. Some of the content in each issue is created by children, and (as with *Kazoo*) each issue focuses loosely on a single theme. *Illustoria* is a visual feast, so I will be perfectly happy if these issues end up on a bookshelf rather than in the recycle bin.

I don't have a third child, so I might need to buy myself a subscription to ***Bravery***, a magazine for kids (and, ahem, apparently also adults) that produces four issues a year, each focused on a brave and bold woman. Maya Angelou, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Mae Jemison, Frida Kahlo, Bernice Bing, and Yusra Mardini have been featured in the past. One recent issue is about Susan La Flesche Picotte, who was the first Indigenous American woman to earn a medical degree in the United States.

—Elizabeth Palmer, senior editor

Since the start of the pandemic last year, the percentage of Black families that homeschool has more than quintupled. I, a Black mother, have been obsessively researching home education options since 2019, because I want my children's education to be as decolonized as possible—and because my oldest child is about to turn five, which means I have to make a decision about his schooling soon. (Plus, I am a type one on the Enneagram, which means that obsessively researching *anything* is kind of my jam.)

BookMarks

We Cry Justice: Reading the Bible with the Poor People's Campaign

Edited by Liz Theoharis
Broadleaf Books, 241 pp., $19.99 paperback

This collection offers 53 poignant and challenging Bible studies—enough for each week of the year—written by a racially, religiously, and economically diverse group of people involved in the Poor People's Campaign. Aiming to inspire the kind of activism that undermines empires, these reflections show how, as contributor Idalin Luz Montes Bobé succinctly puts it, "the Holy Spirit is moving in our midst."

Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls: 100 Real-Life Tales of Black Girl Magic

Edited by Lilly Workneh
Rebel Girls, 240 pp., $35.00

This new volume in the Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls series tells the stories of 100 Black women who have used their gifts to challenge injustice and build a better world. Poet Audre Lorde, journalist Joy Reid, Vice President Kamala Harris, chess player Phiona Mutesi, and lawyer Yetnebersh Nigussie join 95 other women who model the elements of Black girl magic: "hard work, intelligence, strength, and love."

The Complete Birds of the World: Every Species Illustrated

By Norman Arlott, Ber van Perlo, Gustavo Carrizo, Aldo A. Chiappe, Luis Huber, and Jorge R. Rodriguez Mata
Princeton University Press, 640 pp., $65.00

This comprehensive reference book contains more than 20,000 color illustrations—a male and a female of every known bird species—and brief descriptions of each bird's physical characteristics, voice, and habitat. The birds are arranged by type, from ostriches to hummingbirds to penguins. The glossy pages are thick, which makes the book excellent for paging through again and again.

The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948–1985

By James Baldwin
Beacon, 712 pp., $24.95 paperback

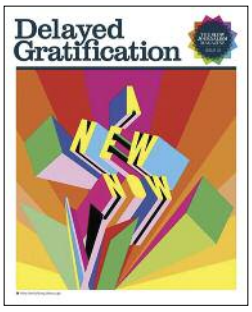
This massive James Baldwin anthology is worth keeping on a shelf and pulling out frequently or keeping on a nightstand and reading a bit at a time. The essays cover an eclectic variety of topics, but common themes arise again and again, including racism, sexuality, and faith. On every page there are blunt and provocative claims that invite extended meditation.

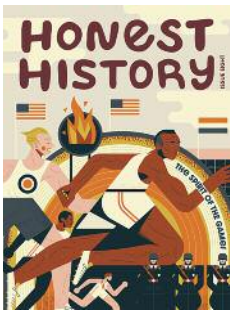
I've quickly learned that navigating homeschool spaces can be tricky, especially if your end goal is an inclusive, antiracist education. That's where ***Secular Homeschooler*** comes in. At first, as a decidedly unsecular person, I was put off by the title. But after actually engaging with the content, I've adopted the magazine as a resource to recommend to any caregiver looking to create an inspired home education environment. And the fact that it is intentionally inclusive means even religious folk will find it helpful. There are only four issues so far (available only on Amazon), but each one is jam-packed with over 100 pages of information and practical tips.

My next two magazine recommendations are for anyone wanting to deconstruct the effects of years of White supremacist conditioning around health and beauty. (Are you sensing a theme in my life?) ***Radiant*** and ***CRWN*** are gorgeously designed magazines that center the experiences and natural beauty of Black femmes. I do think that *Radiant* could do a little more to counter the idea that to be pretty means to be thin, but I'm willing to overlook that for a magazine that highlights the wisdom of Tracee Stanley, one of the country's best advocates for our collective need for deep rest.

—Dawn Araujo-Hawkins, news editor

Since fifth-grade gym class, it has never really been my style to get up to speed. The world moves too fast for my slow self, and I am always behind the group, pumping my little legs as fast as possible to catch up. But is it possible that there's another way? Enter ***Delayed Gratification***, the magazine for slow journalism. *Delayed Gratification* takes pride in being behind, looking carefully at things that have long left the news cycle. It's a quarterly magazine designed to filter out the noise.





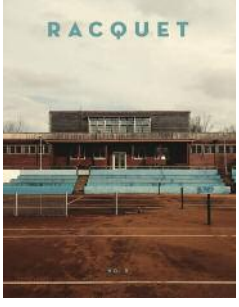
Maybe you have a slow news person in your midst; maybe you have a fast-thinking, adventurous child. ***Honest History*** is a magazine for children that takes them around the world with stories about long-lost cities and empires, expansive thinking about memorable figures, and a lot of truth telling about how the world that children will inherit came to be. It's colorful, thoughtful, and intriguing. By the way, fun fact, did you know that Americans used to be able to send their children through the mail?

For those of us who have never gotten tired of stories and storytelling, ***Parabola: The Search for Meaning*** is a sophisticated magazine from the Society for the Study of Myth and Tradition. It offers rich, interfaith and multifaith considerations of thematic subjects, religious symbols, and spiritual practices. *Parabola* is a conversation, an exploration, and sometimes a revelation.

—Amy Frykholm, senior editor

Publications have gotten to be quite expensive over the years (the *Catholic Worker* notwithstanding), and perhaps rightly so. Printed materials demand a wealth of precious resources in order for them to reach their intended hands. Given the work that goes into them and the work they are capable of—reflecting, challenging, and expanding our world and our selves—magazines (at their best) are worth the price.

For my almost teenage daughter, I am looking at a subscription to ***Teen Breathe***. Created in the UK by the folks behind the mindfulness journal *Breathe*, this bimonthly magazine is aimed at calming, affirming, and inspiring young people, who are frequently bombarded with a host of new concerns—from their own expanding emotional palette to the grim realities of a changing climate. Plus it has recipes, which will instantly appeal to my daughter, who often finds refuge in baking and sharing something delicious.



For my teenage niece who eats, sleeps, and breathes all things tennis, I am considering a subscription to ***Racquet***. Founded about five years ago, *Racquet* is a beautifully designed and illustrated quarterly publication that "celebrates the art, ideas, style, and culture that surround tennis." It is as much a resource for the latest in racquet technology or forehand technique as it is a gorgeously colorful consideration of the game's expansive reach.

Silent night

With wise men, a mom, countless sheep,
and infinite nights of stars,
songs like bushtits swirl off in old leaves,
a twittering lost afar.

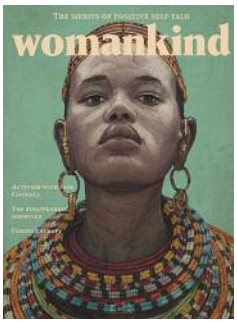
What more can anyone know
scanning our muted sky
than how wanting we are, and how a strange glow
could quicken our breaths passing by?

Muriel Nelson

Muriel Nelson's publications include Part Song *(Bear Star),* Most Wanted *(ByLine), and* Please Hold *(Encircle).*

For my friend who is sometimes in need of artistic inspiration, I think a subscription to the long-standing photography quarterly ***Aperture*** may be in order. The publication of Aperture, a foundation created in New York in 1952 by a group of fine art photographers, *Aperture* self-identifies as the "magazine of photography and ideas." Each massive issue is a visual feast of photographic work and commentary that spans the globe with its voices and subjects. I find that the large-sheet presentation of the work in a luxe, hard-copy format functions as a corrective to the ephemeral ubiquity (or is it ubiquitous ephemerality?) of our social media scrolls.

—Daniel Richardson, art director



I first heard of ***Womankind*** earlier this year when I was finishing up my last semester of college. I was writing a paper on how social movements influence the larger rhetorical culture, and I came across the magazine while researching the National Organization for Women. *Womankind* is an ad-free quarterly women's magazine that focuses on ideas about culture, creativity, philosophy, nature, and ways to live a more fulfilling life. Its writers are prominent journalists, authors, and artists who offer insights meant to challenge contemporary thought and meaning in today's society. This beautiful magazine gives women a voice and celebrates the triumphs they achieve every day.

Another subscription I wish I'd had while at school (and yes, I'm still reminiscing about college) is ***Spirituality and Health***. This magazine is a great resource for wellness and healthy living. It covers topics such as meditation, yoga, nutrition, social justice, and public health. *Spirituality and Health* aims to enhance life by making connections between personal beliefs, physical well-being, and mental health—all while incorporating a variety of different traditions and cultures. It leaves readers feeling nurtured physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

—Marie Watson, editorial assistant

I first subscribed to ***Scientific American*** when I was in high school. I was excited by the awe-inspiring world of science that I never quite found the courage to study seriously in school, and my parents encouraged me to put down the money. *Scientific American* takes up fascinating topics involving everything from the environment and outer space to

Flashes of Grace: 33 Encounters with God
By Patrick Henry
Eerdmans, 288 pp., $19.99 paperback

"My theology is not so much arrived at as sidled up to," writes Patrick Henry near the beginning of this charming book of reflections on God's grace. He invites readers to join him as he sidles through memories of his deepest religious experiences in conversation with the words of writers he regards as companions in faith, revealing how God is hidden in our mundane moments as well as our joyful ones.

Change Sings: A Children's Anthem
By Amanda Gorman, illustrated by Loren Long
Viking, 32 pp., $18.99

Poet Amanda Gorman, who gained a wide following after speaking at President Biden's inauguration, offers words of hope for children in this beautifully illustrated picture book. The book's words are a poem that uses music as a metaphor for social change: "I sing with all the planet, / And its hills of histories. / I hum with a hundred hearts, / Each of us lifting a hand."

On Consolation: Finding Solace in Dark Times
By Michael Ignatieff
Metropolitan Books, 304 pp., $26.99

This enlightening book reads like an extended essay on the history of thought filtered through the lens of suffering. It's not a happy read, but it's not supposed to be. Trying to be happy is precisely the opposite of what Michael Ignatieff learns from his interlocutors (from Job to Dante to Camus) about dealing with tragedy in a way that does justice to the depth of human nature.

Radiant Fugitives: A Novel
By Nawaaz Ahmed
Counterpoint, 384 pp., $27.00

Nawaaz Ahmed's debut novel, narrated by a newborn child in the moment between his birth and his first breath, tells the story of a Muslim Indian woman named Seema during the final week of her pregnancy. As the novel unfolds, moments of luminous insight and beauty punctuate the story line, blending the poetic romanticism of John Keats with Rumi's vision of a compassionate God.

100 Things We've Lost to the Internet
By Pamela Paul
Crown, 288 pp., $27.00

Some of the things we've lost to the internet that Pamela Paul writes about in this hilarious book include the phone in the kitchen, relying on the doctor, civility, maps, Christmas letters, benign neglect, losing the instruction manual, and a parent's undivided attention. There's a nostalgic feel to the book, but there's also a sense that we have the power to reclaim some of these lost things if we wish to.

God's own language

The Hindi service is at nine o'clock,
the Gujarati is at ten. I pick
the later one so when it's done I'll stick
around when people have the time to talk.

And sure enough, my presence in the church
this summer morning raises smiles and nods
from immigrants from India laying odds
this older, gray-haired stranger's on a search.

They're right. This church is where my father's parents
had worshipped God with somber Nordic joy
in Methodist Evanston, Illinois.
Methodist still, this church's declarants

welcome me here excitedly, insist
I sit up front, and lead me to a pew.
There's something in the angle of the view
and sixty years dissolve like morning mist . . .

I am a little boy. It's Christmas Eve.
We're in my grandparents' church, here to praise
the child they call Emmanuel. A blaze
of Advent candles beckons me: *believe*.

We sing an opening hymn, we all sit down,
but when the pastor speaks I start to laugh
because for all the elderly's behalf
tonight's in Swedish—what a funny sound!

My giggles runneth over while, in anguish,
my father elbows me to hush and heed.
My grandma has a better plan, that Swede,
whispering, *Hear that? That is God's own language* . . .

Now I am back among South Asian saints.
The Gujarati done, it's almost noon.
They say come back—they're adding English soon
in answer to their children's bold complaints.

I promise I'll return. I hope I do.
I thought that all had changed, but what had changed?
Though Swedish, English, Hindi get exchanged,
God's language is whatever makes us new.

Steven Peterson

Steven Peterson is a poet and playwright living in Chicago.

medicine and the human body. For those who care to learn about substrate-based peptidomimetic inhibitors or three-dimensional electrodes with mesoporous structures, there's always the peer-reviewed journal *Science*. But for those of us who want to know how elephant trunks really work and what's behind human stuttering, there's *Scientific American*—the oldest continuously published monthly magazine in the United States.

A news magazine of commentary on daily congressional activity hardly sounds like a gift from St. Nick. It seems more like grist for politicians, congressional aides, and lobbyists who don't have a life outside the Beltway. But the widely respected and impressively nonpartisan ***The Hill*** covers everything from public policy to local life in a way that should matter to all of us. Its relatively new subsidiary forum, *Changing America*, tackles some of the nation's most pressing issues through narrative and in-depth features. Organized around five content pillars—respect, sustainability, resilience, enrichment, and well-being—*Changing America* speaks to what we could all afford to pay more attention to in life. When I get tired of eating, sleeping, and cursing the word *partisan*, this forum is one of my support systems for becoming a better citizen.

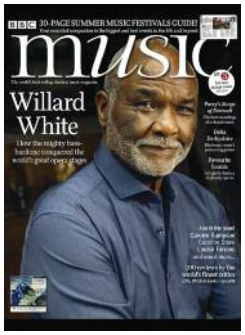
As the flagship journal of the National Audubon Society, ***Audubon*** is, as one might suspect, centered on birds. But to speak helpfully about birds in our time is to delve into ecosystems, habitat, and human behavior in ways that would have seemed low priority just a few generations ago. Through a combination of rich photography, advocacy, informed research, and on-the-ground study, this bimonthly provides a backdrop for some of the things we need to care about if we are to have any birds in our future.

—Peter W. Marty, editor/publisher

To my college-age female friends who are all starting to navigate being an adult woman, I'm giving a subscription to a piece of feminist history: ***Ms.***, the first national American feminist magazine. With pages filled with images and voices of diverse women who cover politics, books, and culture, *Ms.* publishes critical, intelligent, and accessible pieces on topics from abortion to critical race theory to climate change. The magazine also provides free subscriptions to 5,000 people incarcerated in women's prisons and to hundreds of domestic violence shelters.

I spend a lot of time with tutors and teachers of reading and writing, so I'm giving them a subscription to the ***Writer's Chronicle***. From the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, this magazine is geared toward people who love to read and write. It features pieces on the craft of writing and how to teach it, interviews with authors and writers, and news

from the publishing world. This thoughtful and pragmatic magazine will be right at home in any writing center.

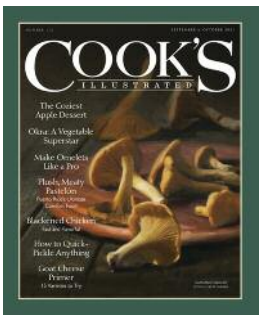


The classical musicians in my life would enjoy a subscription to ***BBC Music Magazine***. This is *the* magazine for classical music fans, featuring profiles of musicians from all times and places, reviews of new pieces, and the fascinating stories and debates behind some of the most well-known music and composers. And every month, your magazine comes with a CD filled with featured music!

—*Annelisa Burns*, research assistant

Throughout my adult life, my beloved Aunt Frances (now 93) has given this native New Orleanian ***Southern Living*** magazine each year for Christmas. I love it. Thanks to one of its many amazing recipes, I make a killer apple, pear, and cranberry pie for Thanksgiving dinner. The interior paint colors in my home were inspired by *Southern Living* home décor photos.

Truth be told, though, I am more of a ***Bitter Southerner*** living with legacies of racism, poverty, and ignorance. None of that is uniquely southern, of course. I've lived in St. Louis and Chicago, where I witnessed as bad or worse. But I have a lot of southern friends—including some living in exile—who will enjoy the inaugural print volumes and online content of the *Bitter Southerner*, a magazine that stands for a better South by sharing the stories of great southern change makers, musicians, writers, innovators, chefs, and more.



Speaking of pies and chefs, I think it's time for me to hang up my apron as chief household cook and dishwasher. Would a gift subscription for my partner to ***Cook's Illustrated***, with its easy recipes and instructions, be too selfish a Christmas gift? Surely not. I am confident he would enjoy some porchetta-style turkey breast, tartiflette (a French potato and cheese casserole), and leeks vinaigrette even more with the pride of having cooked the meal himself.

That subscription might be too obvious a hint. Maybe I should go for something subtler, like the poorly named ***Garden and Gun*** with its homage to southern food, drink, conservation, sport, and dogs. After all, our dog is named Gumbo. I could always dog-ear the pages that have the most enticing recipes as not-so-subtle hints, and maybe he would let me read *Garden and Gun*'s "The Ultimate Guide to Grits." (Great. Now I'm hungry.)

—Trice Gibbons, audience development editor

Home: 100 Poems
Edited by Christian Wiman
Yale University Press, 264 pp., $25.00

As he did in his 2019 book, *Joy: 100 Poems*, in this volume Christian Wiman collects and presents 100 poems that touch on a single theme: home. After an extended introductory essay, Wiman mostly allows the poems to speak for themselves—although he does guide readers' interpretations by grouping the poems in sets and interspersing more than 40 prose quotations between them.

Just Be You: Ask Questions, Set Intentions, Be Your Special Self, and More
By Mallika Chopra,
illustrated by Brenna Vaughan
Running Press Kids, 120 pp., $12.99 paperback

Mallika Chopra offers gentle guidance, honest advice, and structured exercises to help preteens work their way through four sets of questions: Who am I? What do I want? How can I serve? What am I grateful for? The book contains wisdom and wellness practices from a variety of cultures and religious traditions, while emphasizing children's agency in determining the course of their lives.

Aging Faithfully: The Holy Invitation of Growing Older
By Alice Fryling
NavPress, 192 pp., $16.99

In this meditative little book, spiritual director Alice Fryling explores the religious dimensions of aging with gentle honesty. She combines scripture and insights about psychology with stories from her own life to depict an approach to growing older that attends to God's presence in the physical, social, and relational changes that accompany aging. Fryling's prose is calm and inviting.

God's Coming to Visit!
By Franz Hübner,
illustrated by Angela Glökler and Rea Grit Zielinski
Flyaway Books, 32 pp., $18.00

This sweet story for children narrates the preparations and anxieties of a group of animals as they wait for God to visit them. The animals clean themselves up and prepare to impress God. "The fish formed a choir. A gull tried acrobatics. The llama perfected toe wiggling." The lesson of the story—that God is always present and loves us without requiring us to do anything special—is timeless.

Christ and the Thunderbird

by Matthew J. Milliner

WHEN THE OJIBWE minister Kahkewaquonaby, aka Peter Jones (1802–1856), converted to Christianity, he aligned himself with the Thunderbird, seen on the bag he is holding in the oldest surviving photograph of any Indigenous North American. The Thunderbird is among the most powerful spiritual beings in Anishinaabe cosmology, a force against evil with a special, protective relationship to the Anishinaabe people.

In a time when Native Christians sometimes felt compelled to abandon their culture as a survival strategy, the Thunderbird was an indigenous symbol that Jones refused to discard. On his sacred bag, made by an anonymous Anishinaabe woman out of tanned leather, porcupine quills, dye, glass beads, metal cones, and deer hair, the iconic bird stands erect with wings outstretched to the east and west in cruciform. The photograph is now in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

The fusion of Christianity and Native American culture is nearly five centuries old.

Relegated to a backroom gallery of the Science Museum of Minnesota are an Ojibwe altar cloth that displays the word *wakan* (holy) and a head vestment of Dakota convert Andrew Good Thunder. As if to emphasize the continuity of Ojibwe life before and after Christianity, the beadwork is displayed adjacent to a 13th-century ceramic vessel that features the Thunderbird.

Christian Indigenous artifacts have faced scholarly prejudice, sometimes being deemed insufficiently "exotic" to the White imagination. This has led to major losses, and it's important to highlight items that survive: the funeral remains of an 11-year-old Pequot girl, buried around 1700 with a medicine bundle containing the skeletal remains of a bear paw and a fragment of Psalm 98, for example, or a Kiowa man's illustrated vision, received during the revived Ghost Dance, of Christ himself blessing the ceremony.

Over the last 150 years, White views of Native spirituality have shifted "from a shocked contempt for primitive superstition verging on devil worship, to an envious awe for a holistic spirituality," writes Philip Jenkins in *Dream Catchers: How Mainstream America Discovered Native Spirituality*. Modern-day admiration of American Indians can be as patronizingly violent in "editing" Indigenous Christianity as Christian missionaries were in attacking Indigenous ceremonies. And yet the fusion of Indigenous and New Age thought is a recent innovation. As these artifacts of material culture demonstrate, the fusion of Christianity and Indigenous North American culture is nearly five centuries old.

What are we to make of the strange contrast between two receptions of the same Christian gospel in this country? If Christianity alone were at work in our landscape, then Indigenous converts and my White European ancestors would have received similar treatment, and our reception of the gospel in this land would have mirrored the vision of the New Testament, in which all tongues, tribes, and nations are welcomed into the kingdom. As it happens, the conversion of these original people registered no change in their treatment at all. They preached powerful sermons both before and after their expulsion from their land. There were other, malevolent forces at work, and Indigenous peoples intuited those dangerous powers. The evidence survives in art drawn on caves, on rock faces, and in birchbark scrolls.

The full force of Indigenous Christianity is best perceived when understood as a form of creative resistance. This applies even to the most seemingly "compliant" of Christian Indians. Native Christianity is not a mark of inauthenticity, as it is often perceived, but a sign of revitalization in the face of overwhelming pressure. Only Indigenous North American Christianity can address the pervasive imbalance of Christian culture on the American continent, which so often has failed to honor or even acknowledge the land's original inhabitants. As an Ojibwe elder says in Ignatia Broker's novel *Night Flying Woman*, "Only time will tell if [Christianity] is the right thing for our people. If it is, then the people who wish us to be baptized will some day come to know the goodness that has been our life."

Matthew J. Milliner teaches art history at Wheaton College.

Material culture makes the point with particular force. The ancient, sacred birchbark scrolls of the Canadian Ojibwe, once thought lost and then "discovered" in the collections of the Smithsonian Institution in 2000, reveal that Indigenous and Christian imagery were entwined from the start. The Christian Thunderbird, long muffled and suppressed by European entitlement, is once more taking flight.

The 2015 report of the truth and reconciliation commission in Canada cataloged horrific things done to First Nations people under Christian auspices. It also included this quote from Margaret Mullin, a Presbyterian minister: "Can the Rev. Margaret Mullin/Thundering Eagle [W]oman from the Bear Clan be a strong Anishinaabe woman and a Christian simultaneously? Yes I can." As evidenced by the beaded stole she wears in her online profiles, Mullin has taken up the Thunderbird in the name of Christian ministry.

At the Indigenous Christian Fellowship in Regina, Saskatchewan, the self-taught Cree artist Ovide Bighetty's *The Creator's Sacrifice* (2002) shows Christ fused with the Thunderbird on the cross, with power lines extended even to his enemies. The Thunderbird is interwoven, in a variety of manifestations, throughout the series, an Indigenous Stations of the Cross. The Church of the Immaculate Conception on Manitoulin Island in Lake Huron is crested by a Thunderbird in the dome, and there is a carved Thunderbird on the altar at Wiikwemkoong's Holy Cross Mission on the island.

And at the Saint Kateri Center of Chicago, which serves Indigenous Catholics, the cross-crested Thunderbird adorns the altar as well. The endurance of the Indigenous Thunderbird in Christian contexts is evidence not just of the Christianizing of the Indigenous but of the indigenizing of Christianity. While I acknowledge the thorny question of appropriation as a White Christian, I refuse to pass by depictions of Thunderbirds without letting them inform my faith.

NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA, OTTAWA

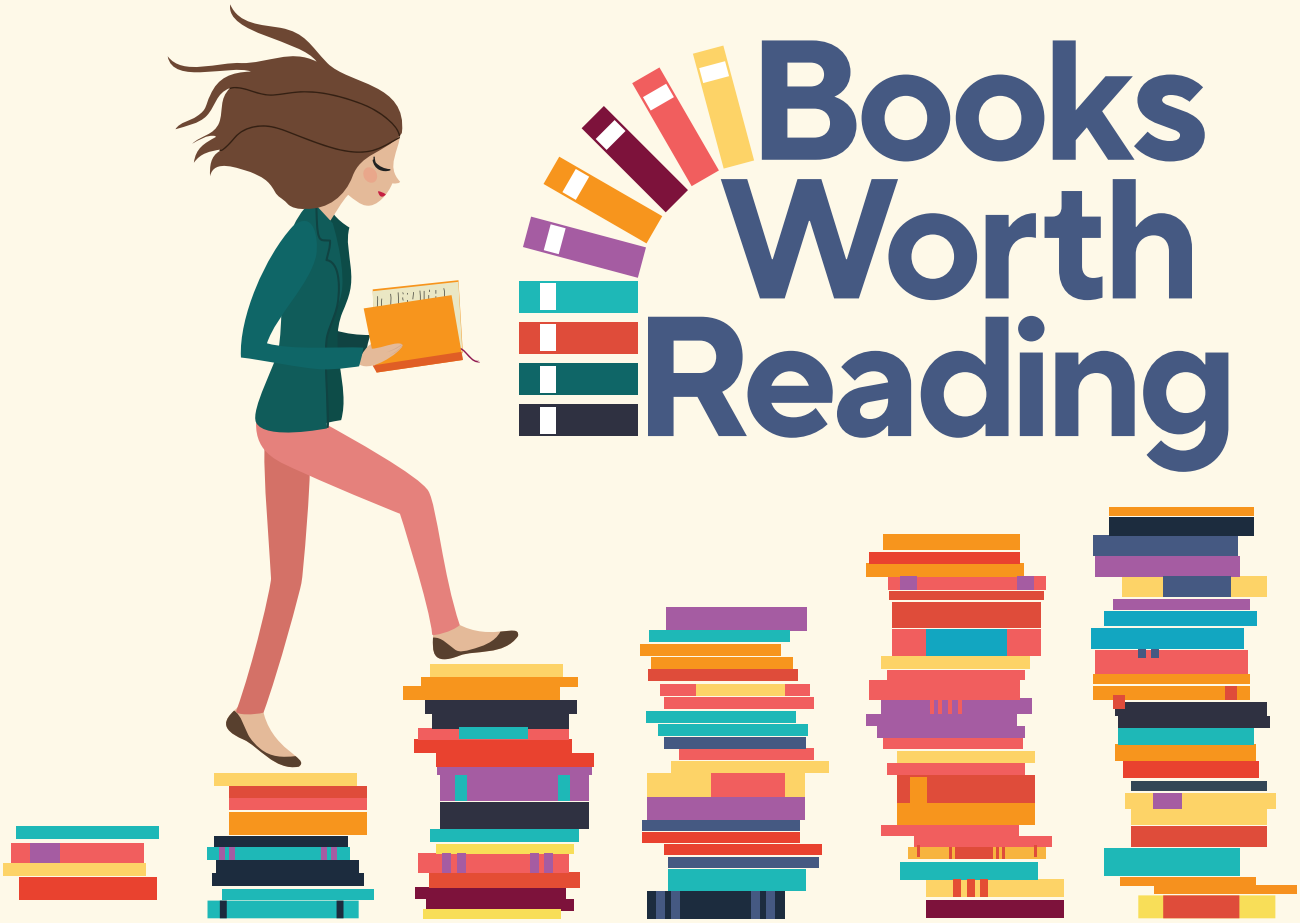
HISTORIC IMAGES: Kahkewaquonaby (aka Peter Jones)—as photographed by Hill and Adamson in Glasgow, Scotland—holding a sacred bag* (below) *featuring an icon of the Thunderbird, a key piece of his indigenous culture that he refused to discard following his conversion to Christianity.

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NY

The Thunderbird is ubiquitous in the material intersections between Christianity and Indigenous faith traditions. But one of the most moving pieces of Indigenous Christian art I've seen is a simple Christ figure, which I encountered at the home of Peter Powell, an Episcopal priest in Chicago.

Powell, who established Indigenous collections at the Art Institute of Chicago and elsewhere, was five years old when the 1933 World's Fair took place in Chicago. Soon after, he began studying the history and the ceremonies of the Plains Indians. In fact, studying Indian culture, he told me, is what caused him to want to become a priest. But just as Powell set out to serve among the Navajo beyond Chicago, he realized that Indigenous America was coming to him.

The 1950s saw the mass urbanization of the American Indian, with Chicago serving as the movement's defining city. So instead of leaving, Powell helped to found St. Augustine's Center for American Indians, which scholars have cited as being instrumental in advancing the Indigenous self-determination movement. He organized emergency relief for American Indians uprooted by dislocation. The city's incom-

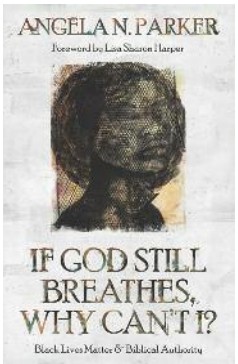


Books Worth Reading

Christian Century books editor **Elizabeth Palmer** sorts through her stacks

Each month, **Books Worth Reading** newsletter subscribers are automatically entered to win a book selected by *CC*'s books editor Elizabeth Palmer.

December's book, *If God Still Breathes, Why Can't I? Black Lives Matter and Biblical Authority,* by Angela N. Parker, is provided by Eerdmans.



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ing American Indians increasingly acknowledged Powell as a friend.

Powell chose the name Augustine for the center. This saint, who himself faced a flood of refugees in his own city of Hippo, knew what so many Christians have forgotten: "What is now called the Christian religion existed of old and was never absent from the beginning of the human race until Christ came in the flesh. Then true religion which already existed began to be called Christian." Or as Powell himself put it at the beginning of his first massive study of the Cheyenne people:

> Christ came as the Perfector, the Fulfiller, of all the world's cultures and traditions. The Church holds that the finest in the pre-Christian religions reflected the eternal truth and beauty of God. Thus, these religions were, in their way, preparations for God's revelation of Himself in human flesh as Jesus Christ.

If this sounds suspect to some, it did not to the presiding elder of Indigenous studies, Vine Deloria Jr., who early on gave Powell and his book *Sweet Medicine* a glowing imprimatur in *God Is Red*, a book that is otherwise excoriating of Christianity.

Native Christianity is a mark of revitalization, not inauthenticity.

Deloria's criticism is deserved. There are plenty of studies that have uncovered and foregrounded the horrors that have happened, and continue to happen, to Indigenous persons in the wake of settlement. More recently, these have been supplemented by studies that finally do more to take into account the strategic embrace of Christianity by many Indigenous people.

"Critics who argue that Christian missions were mechanisms of oppression and social control underestimate the intelligence and awareness of the tribes," write Carola Wessel and Hermann Wellenreuther, scholars of the Moravian missions. "Christianity did not eradicate old [Indigenous] beliefs," claims historian Colin Calloway. "Rather, it supplemented and even strengthened them, providing a new, broader spiritual basis." The Indigenous choice to accept Christianity could be "a decision to restore ancient [Native] values that had been abandoned by other Indian peoples," writes Rachel Wheeler, or even "a cry of desperation and faith proportionate to the misery produced by colonialism."

As an emerging activist, Powell criticized the Bureau of Indian Affairs and attacked the Chicago school system for teaching a false history that ignored the dignity and courage of American Indians. From the storefront post of St. Augustine's Center, Powell said daily mass, organized relief efforts, and ably fundraised, even partnering with Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley for urban Indian relief. Soon the center grew into a north side brownstone home, all while effectively partnering with the complementary work of the American Indian Center of Chicago. Powell was careful to keep spiritual interests separated from publicly funded relief.

Above all, Powell did not maintain control. Instead, "letting go was a form of activism." His entire board of directors consisted of American Indians, and in 1971 he resigned to make way for an Indigenous director, Matthew Pilcher (Ho-Chunk), to take his place. But Powell continued his role as spiritual director of the program while maintaining his scholarly work.

What remains of St. Augustine's Center for American Indians can be seen in Powell's modest north side home, itself a gallery of Indigenous art from the entire continent. It is gathered in his living room not for display but for prayer. There are carvings by the Northwest coastal artist Lelooska, 139 paintings of Indigenous Marys and Magi, even icons painted in the Byzantine style. But the centerpiece is a large brown wooden crucifix of the Cheyenne Christ, in use by the center since its storefront beginning. American soldiers, under the command of Colonel Ranald Mackenzie, had destroyed a great deal of Cheyenne wealth and material beauty. So Powell commissioned a Cheyenne sculptor, Richard West, to depict a Christ that conveys both the suffering and the beauty of his people.

Now in his 90s, Powell remains an Episcopal priest and an honorary Cheyenne chief. He sees no conflict in these vocations. On my visit to meet him, he accommodated my request to see the Cheyenne Christ. He held it as if it were a child and laid it upon his living room altar, where he still performs daily mass. Powell almost seemed to refer to the sculpture as Christ, testifying to the effect of the countless prayers offered by all those from across the continent who gathered to worship before it for more than 50 years.

Christ's elongated body conforms to the gentle bend of the cottonwood. His eyes are softly closed as he absorbs his afflictions with hard-won grace: the wounds inflicted on him by the feather-clad priests of Cahokia, who sacrificed human life on the nearby prairie; by General Winfield Scott, who supervised the Trail of Tears; by Chicago's gun culture and the amnesiac arrogance of its towers; and by the forgetfulness of all who—still benefiting from the remarkably efficient American policy of conquest and removal—live obliviously on this land today.

Standing before the sculpture with Powell, I felt as if I stood in the center of the universe. He was less sanguine, having absorbed some of the sculpture's radiant sadness. After all, in dynamics that parallel the western frontier, so much of Chicago's Indigenous population has been gentrified away from Chicago's north side neighborhoods. "The world as a whole," Powell gently informed me as I departed, gesturing to the Cheyenne Christ, "is not ready to receive this power." CC

Rediscovering my Methodism with the Trappists

Revival at the monastery

by Jason Byassee

I FIRST LEARNED TO PRAY from evangelicals who converted me at a Christian camp. Prayer was a "quiet time," reading the Bible and petitioning God, usually at the start of the day. I was encouraged to pray with the acronym ACTS: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. This practice worked just fine for me, until it didn't. After 20 years or so it started to feel like I was talking to myself.

In seminary, friends told me about Mepkin Abbey, a Trappist monastery in South Carolina Low Country, near the coast. We were learning about the great traditions of the church, including monasticism, and whatever Protestant bias I had was washed away as I recognized that the church had found wisdom and grace through monks and nuns for millennia. We cannot find a time, until the Reformation, when there was Christianity without monks and nuns. I sometimes now speak of Reformed Christianity as an experiment in being Christian without anyone anywhere vowing poverty, chastity, and obedience. The early returns, 500 years on, are not positive.

I learned to pray again at the abbey. So why was I hesitant to bring others there?

The monks at Mepkin Abbey taught me how to pray again. At 3:20 a.m. they gather for Matins, chanting the Psalms for an hour with a long break for silence. They include readings not only from the Bible but from the church fathers and mothers. Then they pray again at 5 a.m. and at 7 a.m. before gathering for Eucharist at 8 a.m. By the time most of us get to our cubicles, the monks have prayed up a month of Sundays—and they're far from done. They pray again before lunch, in the evening, and then, in the most incandescently beautiful of the offices, they pray before bed. They turn out the lights, light candles by a statue of Mary, and chant together the Salve Regina, an ancient prayer invoking Mary's help. "Oh clement, oh loving, oh most sweet Virgin Mary." They sing it with such tenderness it nearly overwhelms my Protestant objections.

"Beauty will save the world," Dostoevsky said, and I see this in these monks. They taught me to chant psalms, to revel in the tradition, to sit in silence, to pray while working, to delight in God's presence. In short, they retaught me how to be Christian. I'll never not give thanks for them.

My wife, Jaylynn, has a photo from our wedding day by the side of our bed. I have, in the same position, a photo of Mepkin Abbey. When I told her once that if I died, I wanted her to remarry someone as like me as possible while also somehow not nearly as good, she responded, "If something happens to me, you have my blessing to join the monastery." Romance at its finest.

In fact, the monks were part of our early romance. Jaylynn heard from me how wonderful they were, so she wanted to visit. I explained that we couldn't sit together at meals. I meant that the monks have their own dining hall and guests have a separate one. The door is open so that guests can hear the reading while we eat in silence. It's the way St. Benedict prescribed things in the fifth century.

But what Jaylynn heard is that she couldn't sit with *me*. So she gathered her tray and breezed out of the guest area—and right into the monks' area. She did as one does when one is nervous, like she knew exactly what she was doing, head up and eyes straight ahead. *I got this, eating with monks, righto*. She cruised over to the monks' block of butter and started to help herself, when 95-year-old Father Christian, with bent back and long beard and twinkle in his eye, asked, "Oh, I see you're joining us today?" He was genuinely delighted. In the Benedictine tradition, guests are to be received as Christ. Father Christian took Jaylynn's misunderstanding of the rules as a sign that Christ had a special grace for him and his brothers that day. We called him "Father Butter" ever thereafter.

Another time at the abbey I volunteered my paltry services to work with the monks. The monks used to run a chicken farm. (They've since changed to a shiitake and oyster mushroom operation.) I went out with two monks to shovel the chicken shit that they sold to local farmers for use as compost. We laughed while we worked, in an altogether more talkative way than I thought monks would be given to. Years later one of those monks, Brother Stan, became the monastery's abbot. He now ranks equivalent to a bishop in the church's worldwide hierarchy. I reminded him recently of those shit-shoveling days. "That was better than a lot of what I'm shoveling now," he quipped.

At the front of the monks' hand-printed Psalters there are two quotes. One is from Thomas Merton, the most famous Trappist. He prays that there will always be dark, quiet churches, so that even if folks don't know how to pray, they can step inside a

Jason Byassee teaches homiletics and biblical hermeneutics at the Vancouver School of Theology in British Columbia.

Courtesy of the Abbey of Gethsemani

AT PRAYER: Trappist monks (above at the Abbey of Gethsemani, in Kentucky) live by daily rhythms that are prayer-filled and sublime.

minute and breathe easily. The other is from St. Augustine, who acknowledges that when we pray through the psalms, Christ prays through us: "This psalm is spoken in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, both head and members. He is the head, we are the members. Not without good reason then, his voice is ours, and our voice is also his. Let us therefore listen to the psalm and recognize in it the voice of Christ."

I was so fascinated by that that I wrote my dissertation on Augustine's doctrine of the "whole Christ." But I have also been fascinated by the way that some of the older monks at Mepkin don't even have to open their psalm books. They know what has long been called "the whole David" by heart.

My love of these people is clear. So why didn't I want to introduce the people at my Methodist church to them?

I was afraid they'd ruin it. Methodists would descend on the place and overrun it. Or they wouldn't like it and they'd judge me for being too Catholic. Or maybe, more selfishly, I wanted to keep my spiritual treasure to myself, to not spoil it by mixing it with my work. I don't know.

But one day, I finally changed my mind. I invited a few lay leaders and a few college students from the Methodist campus ministry, and away we went.

We arrived on the first evening later than expected. I led them all into the church, a dozen of us being as quiet as we could but still making a racket. We rounded a corner into the reserve sacrament chapel, and there the monks were. Every one of them. Silent in front of the reserve sacrament. They looked, to our untutored eyes, like Jedi. White robes, long sleeves, beards, and bald heads. We clomped in and sat down.

Now you see why I was hesitant to taint Mepkin with Methodists. What is the reserve sacrament? What's a monk? A monastery? Methodists are people who believe in individual conversion, study of the scriptures, evangelism. Monks seem against all those things. Couldn't this go badly?

But Mepkin Abbey had fed my soul. Who was I to deny this nourishment to others? I should have trusted my people to sort out what they stood to learn, what they should leave behind, and where Jesus was at work.

One of my lay leaders at the time has the impossible name of Johnny Carson. He's a round man in every way: midsectionally round, bald of head round, broad of smile round, love of Jesus round. He has the biggest heart I know. Our church in Boone, North Carolina, was rarely open when he wasn't there, ministering and serving and encouraging.

Johnny loved the monks from the start. He asked his first question: What are they doing with their hands? I didn't know what he meant. "You know, they rev their hands up when they pray, like they're getting going." Sure enough, I noticed in the next office: the monks circle their hands like they're cranking an engine. What's that about?

Their robes have long sleeves, and those sleeves make it hard to find one's hands. So they have to shuffle a little to free their hands to turn the pages in their psalm books. Johnny saw them cranking a motor. They were, in a way. They were praying.

Once several of the Boone Methodists processed out of their choir stalls and into the procession of monks for the liturgy. I was mortified. Surely they knew they shouldn't do that, right? Go back to your seats! But my Methodist friend Scott could hardly contain his smile.

I learned later that the monks had needed some assistance with a liturgical gesture, and the Methodists were nearby and ready to lend a hand. "I knew what you were thinking," Scott said. "You thought we were going rogue. Actually we were obeying." Good lesson for a pastor. The people might move without you. You might think they're wrong when they actually couldn't be more right.

Mepkin is fairly unique in the Trappist world for how deeply it invites guests into its life. All Benedictines—the larger umbrella under which Trappists exist—pledge to receive every guest as Christ. Yet they also vow poverty, chastity, obedience, and devotion to prayer. Individual abbeys juggle these occasionally competing commitments in different ways. Several monasteries wall off guests from monks. You're in church, but your entry and exit are separate from theirs, and you can't go past the divide. Mepkin, by contrast, invites guests all the way up into their stalls for prayer. The sign asks you to sit in the back, but the request is only there, it seems, to be flaunted. You eat in a room catty-corner to the monks, but you can get to their butter without great effort.

Mepkin's openness is in some ways related to its topography. It is in the South's Low Country. Before air conditioning that meant you had to angle your house on the land so as to catch the best breezes. Mepkin sits above the Ashley and Cooper Rivers, so its pre-AC builders did what sandlappers do and set the buildings at an angle. There was no room for a wall, and if there were, it'd have just blocked the breeze. A building commitment rooted in the local ground became a commitment to welcome the guest with particular vulnerability and openness.

As with most human beings, the monks' strength is close kin to their weakness, their superpower not far from their Achilles' heel. Their openness has allowed them to be easy prey for, among others, the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, who objected to their chicken farm and forced its shutdown. But it also allows them to inculcate their charism with particular intensity. Methodists go home knowing how to be Methodists again.

The pilgrimage gave us Methodists time to talk to one another about things less prosaic than our standard pre-church chatter about the weather and football. Perhaps ironically, when you devote eight hours a day to prayer, it seems you have all the time in the world. You get up ungodly early, sure. And you go to bed weirdly early to compensate. But there's no TV. There's no work for guests to do, other than volunteering to shovel if you want. We had unhurried time to talk. I learned about my parishioners' upbringings, their siblings, their parents, their children, their loves I wouldn't have known anything about without that time together.

The main thing I learned from taking Methodists to Mepkin was about prayer. I had no trouble getting folks to go on the trip; in fact, more wanted to go than the monks could accommodate. And once there, no one had trouble getting up at 3 a.m. for the first daily office. Every morning, hours before the sun, the monks and the Methodists bowed and twirled and chanted psalms. The retreat master finally took me aside. "Look," he said, "I can't get Catholic priests to come to this place. If they come, they sure don't bring laypeople, and they sure as hell don't get up at three o'clock in the morning. What are you feeding these Methodists?!" Our people were hungry to pray like monks. They were relearning prayer, as I had done years before.

I think the reason they took to monastic prayer so profoundly is that Methodism is a revivalist sect. We were born when the Wesleys asked their fellow baptized members of a state church: Are we going to take Jesus seriously or not? If not, fine, but if so, here's the way to do it: Meet in small groups. Pray. Ask who sinned this week. Make promises to do better. Visit the poor. Evangelize. Encourage prisoners. Teach the illiterate. Since Methodism is a revivalist sect, if we're not reviving anybody, what are we doing?

These Methodists knew in their bones they were supposed to pursue a disciplined way of prayer. But as a church we had long since forgotten how. At some point a lot of Methodists went from being despised for their seriousness about the gospel to being just another tall steeple country club. The monks were giving us back our Methodism. Pray like this, at this hour, in this way, and with these people. Don't want to? Do it anyway. And maybe in spite of yourself, you'll start to become more like Jesus.

One night when the Boone Methodists were there, the monks held an anointing service for their ailing members. They brought out the eldest and most infirm monks and sat them in front of the rest of us. Then they prayed, wept, begged God for their health, and lined us all up to pray for them, one by one. We put our hands on their old, bald heads and prayed God's blessings of life and health and peace, on these brothers who are also our brothers. Several Methodists commented on how infant-like their bald heads seemed, some with little white hairs jutting out, some not. Father Butter was there, 102 years old. He stage-whispered to each one of us with inappropriate loudness, "When you're 102, I'll come pray for you." Abbot Stan stood off in the corner, his shepherd's crook beside him, and openly wept. The Holy Spirit was brooding in our midst, bringing healing and life where, on our own, there would be only sorrow. God was busily making all things new. CC

COVID classroom, 2020

Just after eight on a warm October morning,
under a white canopy, the sun comes smoking
through the redwoods into the eyes and paisley
mask of a young woman front-and-center.

She is bent over a quiz on *Moses, Man of the Mountain*,
a novel by Zora Neale Hurston, and her dreads
drop into empty space as she leans
her head to one side. Only nine of thirteen students
are here so far, their motivation starting to fade
at the end of four weeks online and one week out-of-doors.

And yet, a freshness in the acrid air, the off chance
of learning something on this day that the Pharaoh
has been plagued, at last, with the coronavirus.
It is possible, she writes, *that he will let my people go*.

Paul Willis

Paul Willis's most recent book is All in a Garden Green *(Slant). He is a professor of English at Westmont College.*

Faith MATTERS

by Debra Dean Murphy

Miriam of Nazareth still sings

IN THE 1970s the government of Argentina banned all public recitations of the Magnificat after the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, whose children had been disappeared, published it as their manifesto of nonviolent resistance to the ruling military junta. Guatemala did the same in the 1980s. Generations earlier, British authorities in the East India Company excised it from evening prayer. Mary's fiery speech at the beginning of Luke's Gospel may be the appointed canticle for vespers, but it has also emboldened the colonized to resist their oppressors and the traumatized poor to claim for themselves God's preferential love.

In White North American churches, when the Magnificat is read during Advent and little girls kneel sweetly at the crèche during pageants, it is difficult to conjure Miriam of Nazareth, revolutionary forerunner (no less so than John the Baptist) of a Messiah born into the economic disparities and class conflicts of an occupied land. The Virgin Mary of sentimental Christianity we know well; Miriam the Jewish peasant who gives voice to her people's desperate longing for liberation—not so much.

In Luke's narrative, Mary makes her proclamation after she offers her fiat ("let it be done") in response to an encounter we also tend to sentimentalize, sidestepping thorny questions about power and consent and how best to interpret the scriptural trope of angelic visitation. And this unexpected pregnancy? We may idealize this part of the story most of all.

Since last year, several state legislatures have banned abortions at very early stages of gestation. As the courts continue to hear challenges and render decisions, the laws shift back and forth. For many Christians, abortion is the nonnegotiable: the issue that determines where they go to church, who they can be friends with, and how they vote. But it wasn't until the 1970s that abortion was used to organize evangelicals into a reliable voting bloc for electing conservative politicians. Before that, abortion was considered a Catholic issue, and the Southern Baptist Convention passed resolutions on four separate occasions affirming a woman's right to one. As Randall Balmer has argued, the antiabortion theopolitics forged by Jerry Falwell and others was meant to mask the racism that the religious right was eager to exploit around such issues as segregation and discrimination in private schools.

A key component of that project was making abortion first of all an "issue" that Christians are supposed to have a position on. But unexpected and unwanted pregnancies happen to real people who exist in time and space, in places of privilege and poverty, in suburbia and on city streets. These are people whose lives, like all our lives in varying degrees, are constrained by a political economy that systematically undermines human capacities for creating and sustaining social bonds—for cultivating contentment, creativity, safety, and delight in everyday life. Wage labor in the US economy can be spirit-crushing and, for many, backbreaking, as it functions within an ideology that assumes one's worth is in one's productivity.

To sustain this ideology and profit from it, capitalism depends on practices of provisioning and caregiving that it both romanticizes and refuses to remunerate: raising children, elder care, building and sustaining neighborhood connections. Most women by necessity are part of the labor force of the formal economy, while also doing care work for no compensation in the domestic economy.

So abortion is about real lives enmeshed in the realities of home and work and wages and debt. Material poverty for some, the trap of neoliberalism's self-actualized professional for others, trauma and structural oppression for others—these are all conditions (and conditioning) that contribute to the decision to end the life of a fetus. Moreover, the inhumane laws of late reveal the continuing racialized component of abortion politics, given the disproportionate rates of criminalization in communities of color.

An early strategy for enforcing the new law in Texas was the aggressive pursuit of women seeking abortions, along with their physicians and their friends. Now, just the threat of being sued is proving sufficient to the cause. For all the emotive rhetoric around the life of the unborn, the fetus is rendered a legal abstraction and the pregnant woman a criminal to be prosecuted, of whom many seem eager to ask, "How do you plead?" In a different political economy, it might occur to us to ask instead the question Simone Weil posed to those in distress: "What are you going through?"

The Magnificat imagines a different political economy. Like all prophetic speech, it is both commentary on the present and a radical vision of God's in-breaking future. In her song, Mary announces an economic reversal, a destabilizing of the status quo for the benefit of those at the mercy of corrupt systems. When she speaks of her own "lowliness" and affirms that the "lowly" will be lifted up, the sense in Greek is not that of personal humility but rather one's political and economic status. As bearer of the Good News before Jesus himself incarnates it, Mary seems to say to each hearer, "I know what you are going through."

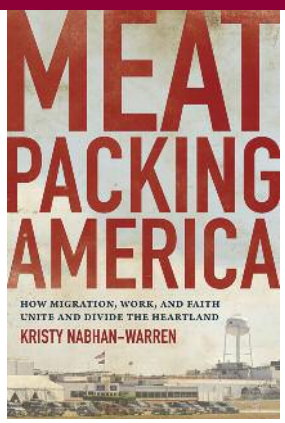
And yet even before the words of woe to the rich and powerful are pronounced, Luke's Mary declares, "He has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." She has been seen. Into our world, where those struggling in a system stacked against them are rendered invisible, where their dignity and agency are routinely called into question, and where they face excruciatingly difficult decisions about matters of life and death, Miriam of Nazareth still sings her song. Can we hear it?

Debra Dean Murphy is associate professor of religion at West Virginia Wesleyan College.

IN Review

Faith amid the slaughter

by Rob Kraft



Meatpacking America: How Migration, Work, and Faith Unite and Divide the Heartland
By Kristy Nabhan-Warren
University of North Carolina Press, 280 pp., $19.95 paperback

The heartland. Flyover country. The Corn Belt. The parts of rural America where the meatpacking industry thrives are dismissed by many people as a sea of red counties on election maps. Yet these small towns and villages are also where abstract debates about immigration, work, and faith put on flesh and blood—where migrants and refugees share packing lines and church pews with White, native-born Americans. In *Meatpacking America*, Kristy Nabhan-Warren destabilizes the often oversimplified view of the midwestern Corn Belt, focusing in particular on Iowa. She reveals a far more nuanced and layered story of how White Iowans and Latino and African migrants manage the shifting dynamics of American life.

Nabhan-Warren presents a series of ethnographic portraits that illuminate the role of work, faith, family, and food as common denominators in a seemingly divided America. She tells the stories of her encounters with migrants, White Iowans, priests, and meatpacking executives. She contends that their lived experiences give insight into the complexities of immigration, people's desire to work, and the role of faith through it all. Drawing connections between the stories of past Europeans settling the frontier and migrants of today, Nabhan-Warren takes a "lived religion" approach, examining the ways religion functions in her subjects' daily lives and inspires survival in often strenuous circumstances. In the Corn Belt, "religion lives in the fields, farms, and packing plants as much as in the churches," and Nabhan-Warren's conversations with Iowans reveal a deep connection between the land, agriculture, and personal faith.

She focuses much of her narrative on the meatpacking industry, painting the Corn Belt as a modern "Ellis Island for asylum seekers and refugees" because "where there is meat, there is work." Whereas the industry used to be urban-centric and dominated by Eastern Europeans, it has since shifted to small towns in right-to-work states like Iowa, with the majority of workers being of Latin American or African descent.

As the influx of migration has changed these small Iowa towns, local priests like Fathers Bernie, Joseph, Greg, and Rudy seek to serve a population of rapidly shifting demographics. Thus, they often must minister in both church spaces and workplaces, visiting parishioners for whom faith helps ease the trauma of working the line. Some companies, including Tyson, employ full-time chaplains like Joe Blay, a Ghanaian meatpacking chaplain who works to support his fellow migrants, praying with them amid the blood and offal of the plant. Blay and his fellow chaplains seek to make such grueling work manageable in a "profane place of slaughter."

Nabhan-Warren's conversations reveal a corporate environment in which both managers (usually White) and line workers (generally migrants of color) use language saturated with religiously tinged words, such as *family*, *caring*, *faith*, *blessed*, and *fortunate*. The face of religion in these plants is not exclusively Christian: at the end of long, hard days, workers "thank Allah, Jehovah, and Jesus for the work" that enables a better life for their families. At one plant, a group of Somali and Sudanese Muslim women craft a sacred space for prayer in a corner of the women's locker room, complete with long drapes for privacy and regular cleaning to halt the ever-accumulating grime of the environment. The religiously diverse employees in meatpacking plants find common ground in the importance their faith plays in their lives, giving them meaning during their long hours on the line.

Nabhan-Warren is careful, however, to ensure that the brutal, violent, and grotesque reality of the work is not lost among these emotional and personal vignettes. She spent time observing work in the plants, and her graphic descriptions of it play a pivotal role in reminding readers of the visceral reality of what it means to "harvest," break down, and package a hog or cow before it ends up on a supermarket shelf. Her horrific (but not gratuitous) account collapses the normal distance between the consumer and the butchering process, reminding readers that those who skillfully cut and package meat are vulnerable human beings balancing work, family, and faith.

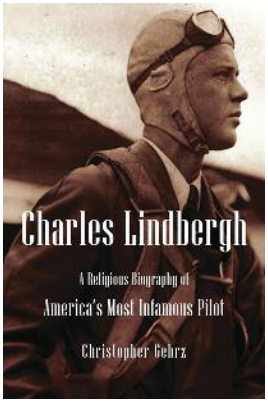
While White Iowan settlers arrived in the 19th century to "plant corn and churches," Latin American and African migrants today arrive to work in meatpacking plants and in the agricultural industry. For both, the Corn Belt's copious job opportunities and low cost of living have been the key to accomplishing dreams of homeownership and stable

Rob Kraft recently graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary.

employment. For both, newer generations—thanks to the hard work of their families—have been able to break the cycle of packing plant work, often going to college and pursuing jobs outside of Big Agriculture. With the help of their faith, their community, and their grueling, relentless hard work, migrants and refugees and White Iowans have built a home together in rural America.

Nabhan-Warren's detailed conversations and experiences with people who live and work in the Corn Belt provide a window into the difficult yet fulfilling lives of rural Iowans. The stories she tells illustrate the wider cultural changes occurring throughout the United States. She effectively reveals a more nuanced picture than the diners full of Trump supporters shown on the news. Yes, there is racism, and there are anti-immigrant views. But inclusivity and intercultural relationships are also being cultivated in the small towns dotting the Corn Belt.

As the United States debates the question of who belongs here, Nabhan-Warren's conversations with people actually working it out together on the ground give voice to those most affected by immigration policy debates. Further, she reveals a thread of faith running through both the lives of migrants and of native-born Americans, elucidating how their faith gives meaning in the blood-soaked world of meatpacking. Anyone interested in faith and work, immigration, American history, or even just a good story will find this to be a fascinating, emotional, and vitally important book. In its pages, abstract political debates break away in the face of the messier reality of migration as a new "religion of real life" is uncovered.



Charles Lindbergh: A Religious Biography of America's Most Infamous Pilot
By Christopher Gehrz
Eerdmans, 296 pp., $28.00

On Sunday morning, May 22, 1927, Charles A. Lindbergh, not yet 26 years old, awoke to find himself "the most famous man in the world." In the previous two days he had flown the *Spirit of St. Louis*, a single-engine monoplane, nonstop from New York to Paris. During the 33.5-hour trip, the young pilot battled rain, icicles, and fatigue. At one point the plane dipped to ten feet above the waves. By universal assent it was a feat of extraordinary bravery.

Though Lindbergh was not the first person to soar across the Atlantic, he was the first to do it alone. When he touched down just before midnight, 150,000 fans were lining the runway. Back home, President Calvin Coolidge bestowed the Congressional Medal of Honor on him, and New York City feted him with a ticker-tape tape parade. One journalist said that the crowds behaved as if the "Lone Eagle" had walked, not flown, across the ocean.

Lindbergh may well rank as the brightest star in the galaxy of 1920s

Reviewed by Grant Wacker, *professor emeritus of church history at Duke Divinity School and author of* America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation.

celebrities, a group that included Louis Armstrong, Jack Dempsey, Greta Garbo, Aimee McPherson, Babe Ruth, and Billy Sunday. But while the other celebrities remain in Americans' collective memory basically for one thing—jazz, boxing, acting, healing, baseball, and preaching, respectively—Lindbergh lingers for a host of reasons.

Some were personal and some were public. The most personal was Lindbergh's self-presentation: tall, handsome, laconic, unassuming—and Nordic White. He is also remembered for the resilience that he and his wife, Anne Morrow Lindbergh, displayed after the kidnapping and brutal murder of their infant son in 1932.

Then there was Lindbergh's public opposition to American entry into World War II, his service to his country, flying 50 combat missions after the war started, and his postwar work as an explorer, environmentalist, pioneer of aviation technology, critic of American militarism, inventor of a lifesaving medical device, and international goodwill ambassador, right up until his death in 1974 at age 72.

That said, many Americans remember Lindbergh for traits of another sort, not heroic but toxic. In the 1920s and 1930s, he was unapologetically racist and anti-Jewish. Those attitudes subsided, at least in public, as he grew older, but they never disappeared. In 2003, evidence of serial adultery and multiple secret families emerged, further tarnishing his reputation.

Any Lindbergh biographer faces a challenge: to tell the truth about the past, both the good and the bad, with both empathy and unflinching honesty. Christopher Gehrz, a history professor at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota, succeeds brilliantly. His biography is crisply written, deeply researched, and cogently argued. Jacket blurbs are not always a good index of what lies ahead, but in this case they are. One rarely sees so many, so glowing, and from so many distinguished reviewers.

The focus of the book is on Lindbergh's religious views. Born in 1902, he grew up in Little Falls, Minnesota, a small farming community in the center of the state. His parents were members of the local Congregational church, but nominal at best. Lindbergh's religious formation was thin. He entered adulthood untethered by the disciplines of church or creed.

That scant preparation did not mean that Lindbergh lacked faith entirely, however. An early love of hiking fostered an almost Emersonian sense of the divinity of nature. This orientation coexisted with an equally strong love for the miracles of technology. He was never easy with a purely spiritual or a purely material understanding of the world. It was both at once, and the line between them was porous. To the end of his life, the pilot insisted, without qualification, that "ghostly presences" had accompanied him on his signature flight across the sea.

More a pantheist than a theist, Lindbergh held unconventional views of Jesus and of the Bible. Jesus was a good

moral philosopher but hardly the Son of God. The Bible, and especially the New Testament, rewarded close reading. In 1944, when Lindbergh was secretly deployed to the South Pacific, space limitations permitted only one book. He took a New Testament.

Organized Christianity was not in the cards either. He rarely attended church, despised dogma, disliked missionaries, and sympathized with non-Christian religions, especially those he regarded as "primitive." For a time, he flirted with Frank N. D. Buchman's amorphously Christian Moral Re-Armament movement, but he never grew serious about it. Historic Christian notions of sin, redemption, personal morality, and social justice never made the cut.

Even so, Lindbergh proved to be an apostle of the growing coalescence of aviation technology and a quasi-Christian myth of the air. In the 1920s and 1930s, many Americans (and others) saw aviation not only as one of the great advances of technology—comparable to the printing revolution of the 16th century—but also as a divine gift to humans. In some ways the shift was both christological and eschatological, for it signaled a fundamentally new era of human possibility and destiny.

Why do Lindbergh's religious views merit serious scrutiny? Gehrz suggests that they prefigure the current rush from religion to spirituality. I see two additional reasons. Lindbergh was a celebrity, perhaps uniquely famous, and his ideas about pretty much anything likely influenced millions. They also represent one person's honest effort to find sure footing when the old certitudes were no longer available.

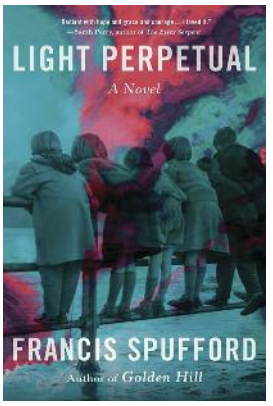
Yet one thing is certain. Karl Barth he wasn't.

Until 1941, when the evil of Hitler's intentions became indisputably clear, Lindbergh stridently opposed President Franklin Roosevelt's inclination to align the nation with the Allies. Like many public intellectuals and a majority of ordinary folk, Lindbergh felt that the Great War, which took millions of lives and ended in a pointless truce, proved that the United States had nothing to gain by entangling itself in another one of Europe's bloody conflicts. Additional factors influenced his thinking. He admired Germany's aviation prowess, believed that the chances of winning a war against the Axis powers were slim, and feared Communists more than Nazis. Still, when Japanese planes bombed Pearl Harbor in December 1941, he changed his mind without hesitation.

Lindbergh held grave reservations about whether Black people and Jews could be assimilated into mainstream American life. His racism and anti-semitism grew from an underlying conviction that civilization requires Americans to enhance the "quality of life." That ideal summons people selectively to nourish the survival of those who will do the most to advance Western civilization. He unapologetically argued that the White race bore that burden by virtue of innate traits and inherited talents. He did not call for forced sterilization (as jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes did), but he did urge other forms of eugenics, measures to disenfranchise Black people, and quotas to curb Jewish immigration.

In short, in Lindbergh's mind, a democracy that rests on a premise of equality, rather than quality, is destined for failure. Neither Christianity nor the great streams of Western history support it. The only sensible posture is to accept the inherent stratification of society and forthrightly favor the most favored.

How then should we evaluate Lindbergh? Can we ever make sense of a person who contains such terrible contradictions? Surely, he was an authentic American hero and, just as surely, an authentic American tragedy.



Light Perpetual: A Novel

By Francis Spufford
Scribner, 336 pp., $27.00

During World War II, a 1944 attack on a London Woolworths store killed 168 people, including 15 young children. This tragedy is the starting point for Francis Spufford's latest novel, which he says "is partly written in memory of those South London children, and their lost chance to experience the rest of the twentieth century."

Light Perpetual follows the lives of five fictional children—Jo, Val, Vern, Alec, and Ben—by tracing trajectories that might have been. The first section of the book imagines the children's futures five years after the bombing; from then on, the sections are structured in 15-year intervals. In each section, brief vignettes give momentary but memorable glimpses into the lives and personalities of these richly drawn characters. Jo is an aspiring musician who never makes it as far as she

Reviewed by Kaitlyn Lindgren-Hansen, *a doctoral student at the University of Iowa.*

wants to; her sister Val falls in with a skinhead and has to reckon with her complicity in a horrible crime; Vern cons his way through business projects while harboring a quiet love of opera; Alec juggles family, labor disputes, and his intellectual curiosity; and Ben struggles with his mental health before finding a lover and faith that, together, heal him.

Spufford's background as a nonfiction writer shines through in this impressive rendering of 20th-century London. Whether he is depicting the process of typesetting, the monotony of working on a double-decker bus, or the affective energy that accompanies listening to music, Spufford hits the mark in portraying the small mundanities that compose a life. The characters' vignettes are written with intimacy, but the novel resists collapsing into sentimentality.

Perhaps the most compelling element of *Light Perpetual* is Spufford's ability to manipulate temporality itself, to consider both the paucities of time and the infinities it contains. The opening pages of the novel describe the dropping and explosion of the bomb at Woolworths in careful, slow detail that seems to stop time itself: "One ten-thousandth of a second is a fat volume of time, with onion-skin pages uncountable. . . . Do we move in time, or does it move us? This is no time for speculation. There's a bomb going off." The prose itself creates a fissure in time, which the reader is relentlessly drawn into.

Beyond the novel's initial meditation on time, the vignettes vividly capture how time is experienced in different bodies. Ben's mental illness ruthlessly accelerates and congeals time, all while the world outside maintains its methodical pace. Vern's attention to the opera fractures time, separating Vern the con artist from Vern the lover of the fine arts. Val remains frozen in time until she detaches herself from an unhealthy friendship, which forces her to make up for all the time she's lost.

The vignettes also show rare moments in which the five characters briefly meet over the course of their lives. These moments never feel too contrived, because the connections are often insignificant to the characters, blips on their larger time lines. Spufford uses these temporary points of contact to underscore continuity between the past and the present. In one vignette, Alec slips and calls Vernon by his cruelly given schoolyard nickname, Vermin, collapsing the hesitant peace they have built in his living room. Their dislike of each other stretches unchanging through time.

As expertly as Spufford depicts relationships that remain unchanging through time, he also attends to the endless divergences that accompany time's passage. With such richly imagined characters, it is easy to forget that *Light Perpetual* is an alternate history; these children are already gone. The novel represents just one alternate history, while infinitely more unfold around the characters with each passing moment. For example, Jo's reflection on songwriting is simultaneously a reflection on the structure of the novel itself:

> She notices how inevitable the tune is already sounding: how meant, how deliberate, thing that she has been pulling together from who knows what vapour, who knows how. It's necessary, this hardening of the separate parts of a song. Without it . . . the rest would melt back into the mush of possibility again.

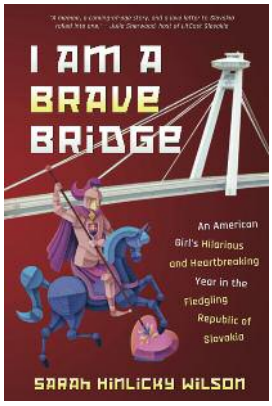
Each decision sediments reality, even as time's possibilities linger in the background.

While Spufford's beautiful prose and detailed characters push us to consider the effects of the war on people, landscapes, and political movements, the novel also reproduces harmful tropes, particularly in Val's vignettes. For example, through most of the novel Val is in a long-standing relationship with Mike, a neo-Nazi whose violence both frightens and fascinates her. On the surface, the portrayal is prescient, given our renewed attention to the threats of White supremacy. However, the characterization of Mike pivots on Val's realization that Mike is gay:

> Father Tim liking men was presumably as much against his church's rules, what little she knew about them, as Mike's desire had been against the rules for a Bexford mod, a Bexford skin, a South London Nazi. And yet Father Tim seems to manage it without violence, without having to be attacking male bodies to get close to them, kicking and clawing and breaking them when he only wanted to be pushing and nuzzling at them.

Val's framing of Mike's virulent White supremacy as a by-product of his sexuality both demonizes gay men and dilutes the myriad influences which shape violent political movements. Rather than responding in a way that prompts readers to engage critically with the complex intersections of racism and homophobia, Val's revelation relies on a worn stereotype that feels out of place in an otherwise well-crafted narrative.

Eventually, time does its steady work on Jo, Val, Vernon, Alec, and Ben. The last vignettes show them at the end of their lives considering the manifold paths they might have taken. Lovers lost, careers changed, enemies made, fame not grasped. As they consider their lives, molded from possibility and sedimented by quotidian decisions, Spufford reminds us that this is only one iteration of infinitude.



I Am a Brave Bridge: An American Girl's Hilarious and Heartbreaking Year in the Fledgling Republic of Slovakia
By Sarah Hinlicky Wilson
Thornbush Press, 338 pp., $19.99 paperback

Many of us have vivid memories of high school, when we were figuring out who we are, trying out various versions of ourselves, and figuring out how the adult world works. Some of us kept journals or diaries of those days as we fell in and out of love, reconsidered our religious beliefs, and tried to make sense of what was happening. Few of us go back to those journals and transform them into a book, as Sarah Hinlicky Wilson has done.

Wilson offers here a glimpse into one year of her life as a teenager. She finished high school in upstate New York a year early so she could move overseas with her family. Her father, Lutheran theologian Paul Hinlicky, is of Slovak heritage, and he had been invited to teach at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Bratislava. The Hinlicky family moved to Slovakia a year after its peaceful split with the Czech Republic, known as the Velvet Divorce. Paul and his wife, Ellen, stayed there for six years.

Wilson stayed for just one year, which she writes about in month-by-month chapters. She reconstructs the year largely from written sources, including her journal from her first month in Slovakia, 27 letters she wrote to her high school friend Colleen, and a set of letters her parents wrote to their parents. Much of the book is written in the breathless prose of a teenager, but from time to time she turns a mirror on her teenage self, reflecting as an adult on the process of her self-discovery.

Sarah (which Slovaks hear as *dcéra*, or daughter) initially saw herself as going home to the old sod, reconnecting with her Slovak roots. She dreamed of becoming a *Slovenka*, a Slovak woman. But soon she discovered that the label did not match who she was becoming. She came to see herself as an American shaped by her Slovak heritage.

At home in New York, Wilson had been a nerdy girl, complete with braces and glasses. She read voraciously. In the village of Svätý Jur (St. George) where the family lived, she became someone else: an object of pursuit by Slovak boys. To them, she was very much an *Američanka* with a hint of Slovakness. She reveled in the attention, such a change from New York. Originally she planned to take a couple of courses at the seminary, but she discovered she wasn't interested. She did, however, snag a temporary job running the seminary's library, where she was discovered by still more Slovak boys.

Wilson struggled to learn the Slovak language and its nuances. She heard her parents commit faux pas in Slovak, but as she recounts, she won the prize for the biggest error, which is not appropriate for publication in this magazine. The book's title, *I Am a Brave Bridge*, is a translation of the first Slovak sentence she and her brother Will composed: *Ja som smelý most*. *Smelý* is an all-purpose Slovak adjective that can also be translated as bold, confident, or undaunted.

Sarah found a home in her church youth group, something she had never experienced at home, where there had been too few youth. In the youth group she found her peers living out their faith, a new experience for her.

At the end of the year, Wilson returned to the United States for college at Lenoir-Rhyne, a Lutheran school in North Carolina. By the time she left Slovakia, her identity could no longer be confined to American or Slovak. She was more than that. The Slovak boys who were chasing her, especially Mišo, realized that they could never live in her world. And she realized that their warm welcome hadn't made her into a Slovak. Rather, it had unmade her as an American.

Like her father (and her grandfather) before her, Wilson eventually became a pastor and earned a doctorate in theology. After a deeply unsatisfying two years pastoring a Slovak-American congregation in New Jersey, she joined the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, France, specializing in the unlikely combination of Eastern Orthodoxy and Pentecostalism. Today she serves as an associate pastor at a Lutheran Church in Tokyo. She arrived in Japan with her husband and son 25 years to the day after she arrived in Slovakia.

Wilson's year in Slovakia provided the background for her calling to serve as a bridge between peoples. Her year in Slovakia unmoored her from her Americanness. She explains it this way:

> Home as a place and a people is the one thing that will not be restored to me. That's the way for many, maybe for most, but not for me. My calling is to link them to one another; to translate—however badly; to interpret and connect, at whatever unsettling cost to my comfort and my pride. My place is not the solid ground on either side, but the space in between.

She is indeed a brave bridge.

Reviewed by Owen V. Johnson, *associate professor emeritus of journalism at Indiana University.*

notes from the
GLOBAL CHURCH

by Philip Jenkins

Trouble in the tropics

In 2015, Pope Francis issued the landmark encyclical *Laudato si'*, a powerful warning about environmental threats of all kinds. The document highlights global warming as "one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day." Such a statement appears daily more obvious, as do the global implications for all peoples and all races. What we perhaps miss is how central that threat is to the Christian future in particular, in an age when Christianity has become in large measure a religion of the tropics.

By midcentury, higher temperatures will mean rising sea levels and spreading deserts, as well as falling supplies of food and drinkable water. As the seas rise, fresh water becomes salinated and ever-larger areas of the world become subject to water stress. Even projecting a temperature increase of 1.5 degrees Celsius (which is optimistic) would double the frequency of extreme El Niño events. Changes in rainy seasons compound the effects of higher temperatures on agricultural productivity, which would be further threatened by extreme and unpredictable weather patterns. Facing the loss of fertile lands, we become wearily accustomed to the technical language of aridization and its most extreme form, desertification.

In terms of the direct effects on human populations, warming will have its most extensive impact on the tropics, the very populous areas between the latitudes of roughly 23 degrees north of the equator and 23 degrees south. That region includes most of Africa and Southeast Asia and large portions of India and Latin America. Within a few decades, 1 billion to 3 billion people in the tropics will find themselves in conditions too warm for comfortable survival. They will be outside the ecological niche in which most humans have survived for the past few millennia.

The word *tropical* will become ever more familiar in our vocabulary of global problems. Presently, the word is commonly associated with dreams of exotic tourism; it's used to sell clothing and drinks. But used according to strict geographical criteria, the term is valuable in demarcating the harshest effects of the climate crisis. When policy makers forecast the future prospects of particular nations in any context, they need to begin with a basic geographical question:

PHOTO BY JUDGEFLORO (USED VIA CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE)

VULNERABLE PLACES: Saint Monica Chapel in Hagonoy, Philippines, just north of Manila, during a flood in October 2020.

Philip Jenkins teaches at Baylor University. His latest book is Climate, Catastrophe, and Faith: How Changes in Climate Drive Religious Upheaval.

What is its latitude? They must distinguish carefully between the temperate zones—those areas between the tropics and the polar circles—and the tropical. Temperate countries are by no means immune from climate disaster, but they are not nearly as endangered as the tropical nations.

That geographical sketch is also a fundamental religious reality. When we seek the regions where Christian numbers are most thriving and growth is most explosive, we are looking at tropical lands. Nigeria, for instance, is located between 4 and 14 degrees north of the equator. Uganda lies between the equator and 5 degrees north; the Philippines are between 5 and 20 degrees north; Brazil stretches from the equator to 30 degrees south. Roman Catholic numbers are ever more concentrated within the tropics, in nations such as Brazil and the Philippines and, above all, in such Black African nations as Uganda, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Christianity remains a global faith, but its heart will increasingly be found in those endangered tropics, within those latitudes of faith.

Quite apart from environmental threats to health and well-being, these tropical believers also face acute political dangers. As we know from multiple historical precedents, economic crises and resource conflicts often result in the scapegoating of rival ethnic or religious groups, if not by states then by mobs and militias. The tropical regions that stand to lose most directly from global warming include the world's most fragile states, those with a high potential for state breakdown or failure and for communal conflict. In demographic terms, states in these regions also have by far the youngest and fastest-growing populations, with the characteristic "youth bulges" that so often portend political turmoil.

Nor is such a linkage between environmental catastrophe and religious struggle merely hypothetical. Scholars have shown a strong correlation between severe El Niño events and outbreaks of revolution and civil war within tropical nations around the world. Between the 1970s and 1990s, major El Niño events had disastrous impacts on Central America, Central Africa, and Southeast Asia. In each case, the resulting struggles drove mass migrations and refugee movements. Other events have also had an impact. The cataclysmic civil war that has ruined Syria over the past decade is incomprehensible except in the context of the historic drought that afflicted the Levant at the start of this century. That drought drove vast numbers into the cities and hugely aggravated tensions between different communities and faith groups.

Now imagine such trends, frequent and amplified, as the near future of tropical lands. That is likely to be the world's religious future—the Christian future—as well as its environmental fate.

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***Six Equals One,* by James Quentin Young**

James Quentin Young is best known for his assemblage work, repurposing found objects, discards, and metal scraps. The mix of rust, color fields, design, and form most often meet for Young in the cruciform shape.

Crosses are formed by reforming that which is broken into a broken beauty. Each cross is a new exploration, a new gathering of materials, a new understanding of how form and materials continue to re-form. Viewers who engage Young's crucifixes, which number in the hundreds, encounter a kind of kaleidoscopic approach to the appreciation of form. Those who truly linger meet as well a deepening path to devotion—one rusty layer, one color patch at a time.

Art selection and comment by Lil Copan*, a painter and editor.*

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