MERE ORTHODOXY

EST. MMV

ISSUE 002

WINTER 2022

CONTENTS

-

Design by www.colornorth.com

Learn more about supporting our work at mereorthodoxy.com/give

T.S. ELIOT

I confess, however, that I am not myself very much concerned with the question of influence, or with those publicists who have impressed their names upon the public by catching the morning tide and rowing very fast in the direction in which the current was flowing; but rather that there should always be a few writers preoccupied in penetrating to the core of the matter, in trying to arrive at the truth and to set it forth, without too much hope, without ambition to alter the immediate course of affairs, and without being downcast or defeated when nothing appears to ensue.

People flourish together. That is the animating conviction behind this edition of *Mere Orthodoxy*. Because it is not good for us to be alone, it follows that we must needs be bound to one another in relationships of love, mutuality, and honor. This insight is inextricably bound up with a Christian conception of politics and nations. You can find Augustine reflecting in the opening pages of his *Confessions* on the ways in which human beings are contingent, unable to secure their own existence in the world apart from the help of others. The reformed jurist Johannes Althusius makes a similar claim, noting that the only way people can live in the world is through cooperation, mutual giving, and sacrifice. Politics, he argues, is the art of ordering those relationships so they can be mutually delightful and healthy.

Framing the problem in this way also highlights the ways in which our direct personal relationships, though necessary for the good life, are not sufficient in themselves to provide us with all our needs. We live by the work of people we do not know. We benefit from the laws of cities and states and nations, drafted and defined mostly or entirely by people we do not know and enforced by people we do not know.

There is something grand about this. I am from the Great Plains and, specifically, Lincoln, NE, a university town of 300,000 near Salt Creek in southeast Nebraska. Lincoln is capable of displays of virtue and beauty that my grandfather's home town of Oakland, a town of 1,000 two hours north of Lincoln on Highway 77, is not. By the same token, a city like New York is capable of a degree of magnanimity that Lincoln is not. The dreaming spires of Oxford, which inspired the *Mere Orthodoxy* logo and which have enchanted so many for so long are a product of this sort of munificence; they are the result of a group of people who might otherwise be strangers binding themselves together to accomplish something grand that no one of them could achieve on their own. This is the glory of nations, the glory of common culture, language, traditions, and custom.

And yet.

Nations, like any other good gift, can be twisted and turned to bad ends. They can become idols, false gods that make cruel demands of their followers. They can become goods that we value above God, above righteousness, above justice. In her essay on Tolkien's nationalism, Holly Ordway notes that Tolkien strenuously opposed the idea of "Deutschland uber alles," but was delighted to affirm the Norwegian counter "alt for Norge." In today's terms, this is why one can say 'glory to Ukraine' and mean it while also being a firm critic of other nationalisms. We must find ways of enjoying and delighting in our peoples without transforming that people into a false god.

But, of course, we humans are very bad at this. It is precisely because we love bad things or love good things poorly that Christ needed to enter our world to rescue us. Our hearts are idol factories, as

John Calvin long ago said. And so nations, meant to be vehicles of mutual delight, provision, and care, can easily become weapons of injustice, chasing after their own comfort and wealth through the exploitation of others. It is not for nothing that the Scriptures so often speak of the nations almost as if they are demonic entities — powers and principalities, in the Pauline language. And so what then? Malcolm Foley's consideration of Black nationalism is one answer to that question. When people are subjected to centuries upon centuries of injustice, they find that one of the surest counters is to forge their own subversive nation within the nation. Thus the ascent of Black nationalism in the United States. It is not only this problem of power and specifically racially coded power that vexes the contemporary nationalism debate, however.

There is a second difficulty: Nations, as we are speaking of them, are organic communities that arise out of the mutual needs and obligations of a people unified around common objects of love. But nations as they exist on the world stage are politically defined entities existing within geographic bounds and governed by large impersonal bureaucracies. And this creates a further problem: Many of us will have complex relationships to our home "nations." Vika Pechersky writes beautifully of this ambiguity in her essay on imperial migrations, but so too does Michael Wear in his meditation on Italian food and national identity. While we live under the shadow of sin, no membership is without complexity, no joy without ambiguity. Our hope for this issue is to honor the goods of nationalism while resisting the ways in which national belonging can be twisted to evil ends. We want, in short, to complicate the nationalism conversation, resisting the almost instinctive anti-nationalism of the left but also the too-easy nationalism that defines many on the contemporary right. Nations are good things. But an unbaptized love of nation will become an idol, something that will lead its followers to damnation. We are for nations. We are against idols. And so we offer to you the second print edition of *Mere Orthodoxy*.

JAKE MEADOR

JAKE MEADOR IS THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF MERE ORTHODOXY. HE LIVES IN HIS HOMETOWN OF LINCOLN, NE WITH HIS WIFE AND FOUR CHILDREN.

On Healing: Learning from Separatists

MALCOLM FOLEY

The idea of a Black nation seems so far-fetched as to be ludicrous, but if you entertain it for a minute, even as an impossible dream, it should give you a feeling of wholeness and belonging you've never had and can never have as long as Blacks have to live in a country where they are despised. - Julius Lester

Derrick Bell, founding father of critical race theory, used the previous quote as the epigraph for his short story, The Afrolantica Awakening, in which an island emerged out of the Atlantic Ocean. Imperialistic nations saw it as an opportunity to conquer and were swiftly defeated by the island itself: the air pressure appeared to be twice the level at the bottom of the sea. But as people continued to explore, they reached a startling conclusion: only Black people could survive on this island. In addition to this, not only could Black people survive, but they could thrive: the island was teeming with natural resources and those who visited were filled with feelings of liberation. This discovery, however, sparked discussions within Black communities, with some wholeheartedly affirming emigration to Afrolantica while others argued that remaining in the United States was their right and their responsibility.

Bell brilliantly used this story to illustrate the range of Black political thought. Political theorist Michael Dawson outlined six ideological categories of such thought: radical egalitarianism, disillusioned liberalism, Black Marxism, Black nationalism, Black feminism and Black conservatism. Many of those categories fit within the umbrella of Black liberalism, in the sense that Black political thought in the United States came to be in the context of the United States' claims about itself. The oldest critique of this frame, however, came from Black nationalists.

There are few things more important than an accurate self-conception. This is true of us as human beings as much as it is true of us as political beings. Particularly in the United States, we must be honest about the fact that we live in a nation that has made promises of justice and liberty, while simultaneously building structures and systems perpetuated and fed by injustice and oppression. For example, we peer into the incongruity of being a slave society fighting a revolution for "freedom" in the eighteenth century. We

must peer into the incongruity of being a nation claiming a robust democracy with both legal and violent voter suppression in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Central to Black political thought is an affirmation of that primal fact: that the nation was not built for us even though it was built by us. Claims of a deep commitment to freedom and equality have been met historically by a concurrent unwillingness to engage with the talons and tendrils of what many refer to as white supremacy: thoughts, actions, policies, and procedures that place those racialized as white at the top of structures of influence. The question then is, where do we go from here? Such a question, when posed to the Christian, raises the question in a particular register: What does it mean to be a beacon of the Gospel in a society shot through with white supremacy, a society in which legal, educational, and even ecclesial structures seem to churn with a destructive energy that suppresses and snuffs the expressions of, particularly, Black men and women? What does it mean to be a beacon of the Gospel when daily activities like driving (Philando Castile), running (Ahmaud Arbery), or sitting in one's apartment (Botham Jean) are possibly life-threatening? It would appear that the Church would do well to learn from traditions that have stared into the abyss and built robust resources for resistance. However, even as robust engagement with these traditions is necessary, frank assessments of their faults is also necessary. One of those traditions is the Black nationalist tradition, particularly as instantiated in the Muslim activist, Malcolm X.

Before considering Malcolm, however, a few things must be said about Black nationalism, especially in light of the recent more public resurgence of white nationalism. One could (and some do) see the two phenomena as two sides of the same coin. To do so, however, would be to make the same mistake as ascribing the same moral and theological value to the existence of predominantly white and historically Black churches. Black nationalism is primarily concerned with dignity; white nationalism with domination. The historical provenance of Black nationalism is a form of political despair: Black people are encouraged to form their own nation because the nation in which they find themselves continues to treat them like a rejected organ.

Such an impulse also flows from an assumption about American life: that it is fundamentally a racial order. Race and racial oppression are not aberrant elements of American life; rather, they have been integral in the nation's formation and they continue to be integral to its continued life. To state the case even more sharply, the assertion is that America is fundamentally racist. The nation's claims to liberal democracy are understood to be hypocritical lies, an understanding that is bolstered by history. On this point, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. agreed. In reflecting on the fact that steps forward for racial justice have historically been met with resistance, King said, "The problem is so tenacious because, despite its virtues and attributes, America is deeply racist and its democracy is flawed both economically and socially. All too many Americans believe justice will unfold painlessly or that its absence for Black people will be tolerated tranquilly." Where Martin and Malcolm diverged, however, was in how much hope they had and where they situated that hope.

It is important to remember that within Black communities, Malcolm X was much more popular than Martin Luther King, Jr. during the civil rights movement. When one peruses his writings, one can guess the reason why: if Malcolm was concerned about anything, it was the unqualified

affirmation of Black dignity. Anyone reading or, better, listening to Malcolm X will be struck by the reasonability of his claims as well as the reasonability of his methods. On December 20, 1964, he articulated his goals quite clearly, thundering: "Politics change and programs change, according to time. But the objective never changes…Our objective is complete freedom, complete justice, complete equality, by any means necessary." Those who balk at his affirmation of self-defense often fundamentally misunderstand his reasoning for it. Malcolm was no bloodthirsty monster. In fact, he was keenly aware that this was the way in which the white media sought to portray him, referring to the fact that people expected him to be "somebody with some horns…about to kill all the white people — as if he could kill all of them, or as if he shouldn't." More fundamental than any of Malcolm's particular political commitments was his commitment to human dignity, particularly Black dignity because of the ways in which it was systemically and systematically denied and trampled.

The affirmation of Black dignity was paired with another affirmation: the affirmation of Black self-determination and self-reliance. African-American history broadly taught this lesson: efforts to attempt to freely engage with the American political process were often met with violent backlash. The Civil War effectively freed Black people from chattel slavery, yet they were only freed from one form, as convict leasing soon took its place. White militias, of which the Klan is perhaps the most well known, formed during Reconstruction in order to resist the terrifying specter of "Negro rule". The violence of racialized lynching struck terror into Black communities, as its often indiscriminate, spectacular, and regionwide spread communicated that Black people were not really safe anywhere. Add to that the fact that the modern civil rights movement was precipitated by a lynching: that of 14-year-old Emmett Till, killed by two white men because of the false accusation of Carolyn Bryant. Each of these discrete, traumatic experiences built to a crescendoing wail in the minds of many Black Americans and it is eminently reasonable that some, if not many, would lose hope in the nation and seek to build their own. In light of a history in which dignity was dashed and self-determination and self-reliance were gutted by enslavement and predatory violence, the cry of "by any means necessary" was a welcome one.

Much can be said and has been written about the Black nationalist tradition and what I have focused on in the previous paragraphs have been its more universal elements. I have not focused on the claims of some individuals like Elijah Muhammad, who argued that white people are evil or others who were more strict separatists like Marcus Garvey. Their conclusions made sense given their contexts, but such claims are beyond the pale for those who affirm that all humanity is, while fallen, created in the image of God. Black nationalism is not inherently founded on a doctrine of Black supremacy but some Black nationalists have taken it to that level. The core of the thought for thinkers who would fit in this category, however, is not ethnic supremacy, but rather survival. Black political thought exists at the nexus of the practical and the theoretical because we have never been able to afford not to. This approach, however, is shared by both Black political thinkers and Black theological thinkers, leading to an ecclesial tradition that sees the political pursuit of justice as a necessary consequence of a Gospel-saturated life.

So then the question remains: what does the Christian have to learn from the best of Black nationalism? Whenever one asks a question like

this, one must keep at the forefront of one's mind the ethical non-negotiables of our faith: love of God and love of neighbor. Thus the question is really, "How does a robust engagement with Black nationalism equip those united with Christ to love God more and to love one another more wisely?" Here, Malcolm X's political trajectory is even more helpful. Near the end of his life and following his pilgrimage to Mecca, Malcolm began to drift from Black nationalism toward a more global approach. He became open to white cooperation rather than refusing it outright because of the evils perpetuated by white people. When he became aware of and committed to not just the struggle of Black people in America but the struggle of all oppressed people everywhere, his political assumptions and ethical commitments moved toward pan-Africanism. Some will be nervous at the fact that later in life, Malcolm embraced a more socialist agenda but they must also be aware of the fact that later in life, Martin Luther King, Jr., with his distinct religious beliefs, came to affirm a similar agenda. Both began to realize the close relationship between racism and capitalism: that the construction of race was ultimately for the purpose of economic exploitation. This intersection indicated a tendency in the battle against racial oppression: a tendency to realize that the fight is much deeper and more difficult that we can imagine. Malcolm realized, as we must, that social evil is not reducible to race, though in our particular context, race continues to be one of the determinative factors in the unjust distribution of wealth, opportunity, and health outcomes. Yet a refusal of that reductionism did not quench his commitment to racial justice; it merely added another dimension to it. So it must also be for us. A history of racial violence ought not surprise a people convinced that sin pervades every inclination of the human heart. The pervasiveness of that violence also ought not dissuade us from rooting out the impulses that support it in our own hearts and minds as well as in our families and communities. Love of God and love of neighbor require us to be honest about the ways in which God has been profoundly dishonored by our ignorance and trampling of our neighbors, including the ways in which we suppress and ignore the racialization of our society. In order for us to love one another wisely and well, however, we must understand one another's needs. In a society that thrives on our continued ignorance of one another's plights, close relationships with the marginalized are a beacon of Christlikeness.

One of the most compelling aspects of Malcolm X's ministry was his unrelenting identification with the suffering. The same was true of the Christian abolitionist before him, David Walker, who penned an Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World. Both of these men looked around at the women and men in their midst, saw that society was crushing them and lying to them about themselves, and sought to remedy that trauma with truth and empowerment. This has indeed been the primary thrust of Black nationalism: not domination, but empowerment of a people whose power has been repeatedly stripped. If we understand the Gospel as the power of God unto salvation as well as the true answer to all of our needs, we must ask the question of whether or not it has the power to empower and heal the traumatized, particularly those who have faced and continue to face racial trauma.

The answer, of course, is "yes, it does." The Apostle reminds us in Ephesians that we wrestle not against flesh and flood but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Ephesians 6:10-17 is perhaps one of the most encouraging passages in the struggle against white supremacy.

While some Black nationalists would, given the horrors of our history and present, understandably point to white people as the devil, we must compassionately point to actual demonic realities, recognizing that those who seek to oppress, to dominate, and dehumanize are not themselves the devil but instead of their father, the devil. Yet He that is in us is greater than he that is in the world. If we stare into the abyss of violence and injustice in the world, it can be easy to turn to despair or back-breaking, self-reliant effort. Both lead quickly to burnout and disillusionment because they misunderstand the nature of the war. We are not fighting one another ultimately, but rather the one who has the power of death. In order to defeat that one, we must align ourselves with the One who, through death, freed those who were held in slavery by the fear of death. Black nationalists in their clear and expressed solidarity with Black people filled and, in many cases, continue to fill a significant hole in American society: a group of folks who affirm Black dignity militantly and without question because of the recognition that even when such dignity is not under direct attack, it is always under atmospheric attack. One thinks back to the Black Panther Party, whose most significant work included its free breakfast program for children and whose Ten-Point Program was primarily concerned with, as the tenth point states, "land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace." An unrelenting struggle for these basic needs animated the Party and guided its action. From this, we have much to learn.

Love of neighbor begins with the recognition of the worth of our neighbor as well as a recognition of their struggles. In order to do that, however, my white brothers and sisters must recognize that the Black experience of the US is markedly different from their own. My white brothers and sisters must recognize that, as Dr. King said, "for the good of America, it is necessary to refute the idea that the dominant ideology in our country even today is freedom and equality while racism is just an occasional departure from the norm on the part of a few bigoted extremists." Racism is unfortunately not a localized malady; it is a systemic one, spreading through the bloodstream in a way that is not easily excised. But it is nonwhite communities that see and feel it most deeply.

Julius Lester's quote poignantly points to a Black nation as a source of wholeness and belonging and there are many who continue to think that that is the only way to find such wholeness and belonging. The Christian ought to know better, but often has no real situations to point to as a counterargument. The American church is surely guilty of this failure, but it need not continue to be so. We ought to be a beacon of wholeness and belonging in a fractured and alienated world. No nation can supplant the body of Christ and no nation or national identity can provide the nourishment and worth that vital union with Christ communicates. But in order for our neighbors to understand that, we must say it and live it.

MALCOLM FOLEY IS THE DIRECTOR OF BLACK CHURCH STUDIES AT TRUETT SEMINARY AND PASTOR OF DISCIPLESHIP AT MOSAIC WACO.

Marilynne Robinson Imagines the Soul of America

MORIAH AND JUSTIN HAWKINS

"There is no life I know to compare with pure imagination.
Living there, you'll be free, if you truly wish to be."
- Gene Wilder, Pure Imagination

The frigid breeze gusting through downtown Des Moines, Iowa, did little to help the Democratic Nominee for President, Joe Biden, as he struggled to project his aging voice over the cacophonous sounds of traffic. It was October 30, 2020, just two months after he secured the nomination, and coronavirus protocols and public image management dictated that the audience for his speech remain in their cars, safely distanced from each other, and from Biden himself. Barred from clapping and shouting, the eager crowd instead honked their horns at his applause lines, giving the combined impression that a used car lot had attained sentience and developed an interest in national politics. The Biden campaign, perhaps not trusting his voice over the wind and car horns, left little to chance by printing his central message on their campaign banners, on his podium, and behind the dais, leaving even the hardest of hearing in the audience informed that Biden thought that we are in a "Battle for the Soul of the Nation."

To say that America has a soul may be opaque, but it is not new. The 1904 version of the poem now known as "America the Beautiful" invoked God to sanctify the nation and "Confirm thy soul in self-control/thy liberty in law." Here America not only has a soul, but it, like the souls of small children, needs formation, and like the souls of small Christian children, requires Confirmation. Christians have it on good authority that human beings have souls, that they are the sorts of things the maintenance of which one ought rather to prefer instead of gaining the entire world. But it is altogether unclear what might be meant by extending that metaphor to the nation. If nations, like people, have souls, that must mean that they have some essence, that they are some thing and not some other thing, that they might acquire characteristic virtues and vices that, through long habituation, become resilient against change. It means that the very essence of the project might be imperiled, or redeemed. The soul of America might be that thing which is, as Reagan suggested, essentially good, or, as some on the Left suggest, essentially racist."

Yet ask any of these believers in the existence of the American soul what the definition, the essence of the American soul might be, and you are more likely to get, at best, yet another metaphor or metonymy. America is her flag, her armed forces, apple pie and baseball, freedom, "cold beer on a Friday night / a pair of jeans that fit just right / and the radio up," a great unfinished symphony, purple mountain majesty and amber waves of grain. At worst, they will reply polemically, partisanly: America is that thing which my opponents hate, and which will be lost eternally if you do not vote for me in this most consequential election of our lifetime. In short, America is imagined, a constellation of images, practices, institutions, brands, personages that evolve and mutate. Martin Luther King Jr. and Frederick Douglass are now essential and great Americans, though many of their contemporaries were not so sure. Even the very concept of the nation is a metaphor; the word itself derives from *natus*, "birth." A nation is those who share a birth, as most Americans do not.

When Benedict Anderson argued in 1983 that nations are "imagined communities," he had in mind this strange combination of the pervasiveness of national allegiance and rhetoric alongside the inability to reduce that essence or that soul to identifiable features. He observed the obvious fact that each individual citizen of most nations will, over the course of her life, never meet the vast majority of people nor visit the vast majority of places that constitute her nation: "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." In light of this fact, he argued that nations are imagined, which is not to say that they are fictitious. On the contrary, they are constructed into something quite real, but constructed nonetheless. When the hearts of patriotic Americans swell, it is likely at the thought of D-Day, or Gettysburg, or the Statue of Liberty, or National Parks, not the slums of Detroit, the food deserts of Appalachia, or the crumbling tunnels and bridges of the Metro North Railroad. But those latter liabilities are descriptively as truly American as are those former glories, though they might be less American normatively. To call something one likes 'American,' and something one does not like 'unamerican' slips easily and imperceptibly between the descriptive and the normative. Enormous amounts of political rhetoric in America today turn on precisely this unspoken equivocation.

To perform America, our national politicians fly themselves to Iowa, as Biden did on that cold day in October, and visit the Iowa State Fair. There they eat food impaled upon sticks and feign delight in the presence of hometown diners, before returning home to their large coastal cities and private chefs. Joe Biden came to Iowa to talk to America about her soul, and was on a plane out of the state by nightfall. But Marilynne Robinson has taken up residence in that state the political class only visits, and when she imagines America, she imagines Iowa. Her *Gilead* novels are all set there, among its amber waves of grain. Like the still-life paintings of the Dutch Masters, her novels are full of the glories of the quotidian, of tranquility that is domestic in the most literal sense. Nobody in her novels runs off to Broadway. When they do run away, it is into the Far Country in exile, away from the house of the loving father. The promised land, the land of nostalgic longing, is Iowa.

Iowa is also Robinson's microcosm of America.

"The United States," she says in her *What Are We Doing Here?*, "is in many ways a grand experiment. Let us take Iowa as an example." She then presents a brief history of her adopted home state, where farmers plowed the fields and set the foundations of a public university specializing in the arts, never seeing any contradiction between the active life and the contemplative life. Here is a city that has foundations, where farmers and scholars are members of one body, neither of which can say to the other that they have no need of them. The harmony of agrarian dignity and scholarly excellence is something like the heart of Robinson's account of America. When Marilynne Robinson imagines America, she envisions a learned and human tradition that cascades down from the alpine heights of Whitman and Emerson, Thoreau and Hawthorne, Edwards and Calvin, into the minds of the alumni of America's great land grant colleges all across the Midwest.

Robinson believes that to be an American is to hold title to an enormous inheritance, the abandonment of which impoverishes her citizens and robs the world of admirable displays of human grandeur. Part of that inheritance is Christianity. Her essay "Fear" begins by stating plainly that "America is a Christian country. This is true in a number of senses." She is not only a Christian country, but a Calvinistic one. In "Open Thy Hand Wide," she observes "Calvinism is uniquely the *fons et origo* of Christian liberalism in the modern period, that is, in the period since the Reformation, and this liberalism largely has had its origins in the Old Testament." Political theorists are fond of noting that Tocqueville, when he moves his attention to identifying the *Point of Departure of the Anglo-Americans*, looks not to the Federalist Papers, but to the New England Puritans and their love for bounded liberty, civil society, piety toward God and suspicion toward kings. Robinson is thoroughly Tocquevillian on this point.

Yet Americans seem stubbornly insistent upon living like the many Bitcoin billionaires who have forgotten the password to their accounts. They live a life of poverty, isolated from the wealth that is rightly their own, but which they have not the means to access. The result is that it lives captive to a fear that expresses itself in a paranoid style of politics, in widespread gun ownership, in an eagerness to be captive to conspiracy theorizing and persistent suspicion against internal dissenters and domestic threats. We have heard these complaints before, yet not, perhaps, in precisely the way she phrases them, for in her view, these ills come not from overmuch patriotism, but from a deficient patriotism: "We might step back and say that there are hundreds of millions of people who love this nation's soul, who in fact are its soul, and patriotism should begin by acknowledging this fact. But there is not much fear to be enjoyed from this view of things. Why stockpile ammunition if the people over the horizon are no threat?"

The other great storehouse of inherited wealth is the American literary tradition of Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman — that latter two of whom she confesses to "revere." That theological word is fitting, for it is precisely a kind of democratic reverence that she has learned from them, a persistent awe, sometimes willed and sometimes spontaneous, in the presence of and by the fact of other people: "everything depends on reverence for who we are and what we are, on the sacredness implicit in the human circumstance." The other great virtue she seems to have learned from them is democratic piety, which Jeffrey Stout, following

Emerson, called "the just or appropriate response to the source of one's existence and progress through life." She is fantastically grateful, and therefore unabashed in her use of phrases more native to the soil of campaign rhetoric, like, "I defer to no one in my love for America." She says and, by all appearances, feels patriotism that might sound more natural coming from a much-beloved small town mayor just before he kicks off a parade of fire trucks and beauty pageant contestants through Main Street. She seems altogether unaware that those who can speak at length about the cultural programming on NPR are not supposed to feel a flutter of pride pass through their breast at the sight of the American flag.

And yet, she would not call this nationalism. She has little kind to say of the so-called American nationalists of the last few years, scorning them as "those lovers of country, these patriots, [who] are wildly unhappy with the country they claim to love and are bent on remaking it to suit their own preferences, which they feel no need to justify or even fully articulate. Neither do they feel any need to answer the objections of those who see their shaping and their discipling and mutilation." She is never more like Jeremiah than when warning that "something called Christianity has become entangled in exactly the strain of nationalism that is militaristic, ready to spend away the lives of our young, and that can only understand dissent from its views as a threat or a defection, a heresy in the most alienating and stigmatizing sense of the word."

Undoubtedly there would be some features of Robinson's political imagination that today's American conservative nationalists might endorse. In "Family," she endorses public recognition of the Sabbath, "I do not think it is nostalgia to suggest that it would be well to reestablish the setting apart of time traditionally devoted to religious observance." She bemoans in that same essay the impossibility of raising a family today on a single income. She is convinced America has a national culture worth preserving, and that public displays of religiosity are among them. And yet, you will never find in Robinson's writing the more noxious utterances of today's conservative nationalists: the coded and esoteric endorsement of suppressing minority religions, the vilification of refugees and asylum seekers fleeing the very countries our predator drones have bombed into dysfunction, the Ivy League law school graduates insisting that "the professors are the enemy," the sham performance of virility and faux masculinity by a man altogether too cowardly — too lacking, in the old Greek definition of courage, in manliness — for repentance at aiding and abetting a seditious mob in front of the Capitol. Robinson shows that loyalty to country, full-throated endorsement of its traditions and institutions, and an almost giddy optimism about its future, need not be attended by the invention and ritual castigation of the sinister other, foreign or domestic. To catch Robinson's imagination of America is to find today's American conservative nationalists hocking knockoff goods at inflated prices, while the real item, offered elsewhere, with far greater pedigree, can be had quite easily, at no price, like all inheritances. To read Robinson's giddy panegyrics on America is to realize that shouldering the serious task of stewarding America's institutions and traditions need require nothing of the denigration of non-Americans or the vilification of the sinister other. To love someone is to will that they have the good. So it is with nations.

Robinson is happy to insist that the valorization of America, and of high literary culture, and the refulgent glory of being a human, are all easily compatible. We need not abandon our fellow moderns out of love for the ancients, nor compare bashfully the paltry literary achievements of our young homeland with the giants of the Old World. Americans can stand proudly on their national traditions, and that standing proudly does not at all besmirch the denizens of some other country from their willingness to do the same.

Yet perhaps this is all just a bit too clean, too much harmony and not enough cacophony. The American intellectual tradition is much more a long argument over time than a sustained and echoing chorus. When Edwards and Calvin speak of the glories of the human creature, as they assuredly do, they are speaking of the glories that God has preserved from total destruction by sin. When Emersonians speak of the glories of the human creature, they mean to deny the fundamental disorientation that Calvin and other Augustinians insist can rightly be attributed to humanity and recognized in even the best of our works. Emerson's religion relies on a kind of pantheism for which Calvin might have been tempted to bring out the matches and kindling. We are told that one day the lions and the lambs might one day lie down together, but even then, the Emersonians and Calvinists might be a bit more hesitant.

At the height of Robinson's popularity, it was sometimes common to hear professional scholars of Calvin and Edwards speak appreciatively of the free publicity she provided to them, even while softly demurring to each other about her interpretations of those figures. She seems to adore Edwards largely on the basis of a single (albeit quite beautiful) footnote about moonlight in his *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*. Meanwhile, Robinson's Calvin, far more Renaissance gentleman than burner of Servetus, finds fictional echo in the Reverend Ames of Gilead, who is far happier waxing poetic about water and trees than about hell, sin, and judgment. In that famous taxonomy of lumpers and splitters, Robinson is a lumper, who imagines an American intellectual tradition by sanding down rough edges to establish harmony. The result is the construction of a history in which a pantheistic nature mystic, a fire and brimstone Augustinian slave-holder, and a New Deal Democrat are all basically interchangeable with each other, and synonymous with the essence, the soul, of America itself.

But America in reality seems a bit less sanitized than this, and her traditions not an unbroken chorus of echoes from Edwards to Emerson, but a family feud of warring interpretations and contestation. The radicals, like the conservatives, are part of the family as well. Americans fight with each other all the time, and there was never a moment when this was not so. Our vices mix with our virtues all the way down, inextricably, like wheat and tares. If America is going to produce sons and daughters with enough bravado, alone among all dwellers upon God's earth, to stand on the surface of the moon, that same self-confidence against the odds is probably going to produce some anti-vaxxers as well. A country in which Thomas Edison and Bill Gates tinker away in their basements, ignoring altogether what the scientific establishment thinks is possible, is inevitably going to be one in which some people tinker away on themselves with Ivermectin, similarly disregarding the scientific establishment. Our mode of public

discourse is less Socratic questioning in the *agora*, and more wild gesticulating with breadsticks in hand around an Italian family dinner table. America is an unruly place and an unruly people, all troublesome and loveable mixed in together. Harmonizing Edwardsians and Emersonians appears an easy task compared to harmonizing the Afropessimists, the Catholic Integralists, the Lost Cause apologists, the Stalinists, who all hold the same passport as the Neoliberals and Libertarians among us. These are all Americans too. We may not look forward to seeing all of them at the family reunions, but they are among us, and the habits of democratic citizenship demand that even they learn to live together with each other, and we with them. Barring some miracle of persuasion that does not seem forthcoming, the only other solution to dealing with our contestation is domination by one faction over another.

It is sometimes said that a nation without a shared view of the good cannot be preserved. It is not altogether clear what those who say such things mean by them. In extreme cases, they are obviously correct; a house divided against itself cannot stand. And yet, the vast majority of human societies in history have not been preserved to this day except in museums, regardless of how much they agreed on a substantive account of the good. Meanwhile America, that hotbed of disagreement and ungovernability, has done pretty well for itself these last four centuries, despite never agreeing among ourselves on matters of final significance. A greater share of Americans routinely report believing their country to be "the greatest in the world" than do the citizens of any other country about their own nations. Most Americans have not lost faith with America, even if they are tempted to lose faith with each other. But that we must not do. The habits of democratic citizenship require nothing less than a willingness to continue arguing with each other and to forswear domination against each other. The soul of America depends upon it.

MORIAH HAWKINS WAS BORN AND RAISED IN SMALL-TOWN WEST TEXAS, EDUCATED AT BAYLOR UNIVERSITY AND YALE DIVINITY SCHOOL, AND NOW WORKS AS PROGRAM MANAGER OF THE AUGUSTINE COLLECTIVE, A DEPARTMENT OF THE VERITAS FORUM. SHE IS MANAGING EDITOR OF FARE FORWARD.

JUSTIN HAWKINS IS PURSUING A COMBINED PHD BETWEEN THE DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES AND THE DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE. HIS RESEARCH INTERESTS FOCUS PRIMARILY ON CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ETHICS, POLITICAL THEOLOGY, AND THE POLITICAL THEORY OF THE BIBLE, WITH SECONDARY RESEARCH INTERESTS IN SYSTEMATIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY, DISABILITY ETHICS, AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES.

IMPERIAL MIGRATIONS

VIKA PECHERSKY

The question I dislike the most is, "Where are you from?" My Eastern-European accent usually gives away the fact that I am not, should I say, local. Now that I live on the East Coast, I am often tempted to say that I am from Iowa, since that is where I previously lived. How do I convey to someone who expects a short answer, usually the name of a country, that I am from the collapsed Empire, a country that no longer exists, that I am from the newly independent Central Asian country of Uzbekistan, yet not ethnically Uzbek?

It is complicated. To say that I am Russian would mean to my American friends that I am from the country of Russia. I tried that and inevitably got questions about Russian politics or comments about a certain American TV show centered around a Russian sleeper cell. I am always at a loss as to how to respond to such comments. On the other hand, I didn't want to mislead people by simply saying that I was from Uzbekistan because people usually assumed that I belonged to its ethnic people — Uzbeks, which I did not. I don't look like one; I don't speak the Uzbek language and, for the most part, share no religious and cultural identity. So, you see, my answer is not that straightforward.

When I first moved to the United States, I tried to give a thorough response which included a mix of the recent history of Eurasia and global geography. Most people did not seem to have interest in history and geography lessons when asking about my origins. Now, after living in the U.S. for some time, if someone asks me, I usually respond that I am ethnically Russian or that I was "born and raised" in one of the only two double landlocked countries in the world.

It has since occurred to me that those asking simply want to satisfy their curiosity and place me on a mental map of the globe. Perhaps, asking about my origins is their way of showing interest, courtesy, even hospitality. For me, it is an almost existential question that I need to answer truthfully first to myself and then to those who ask me. To be ethnically Russian in Uzbekistan means to belong to the remnants of the failed Empire. It is a precarious place to be because, while I may have had a sense of belonging to a group of people whose history, politics, arts, and sciences have dominated and continue to dominate vast post-Soviet territories, that history has always been contentious at best. Growing up, I was surrounded by the culture that produced Dostoyevsky, Tchaikovsky, and Rachmaninov. This same culture is now associated with a massive social experiment of the past century that destroyed tens of millions of lives; a place where any change seems to be only for the worse, and where, to this day, martyrdom is almost certain for those who imagine things otherwise.

When there is no possibility of significant change for society as a whole, one can at least seek a better

fortune for themselves. For emigrants like me, the West, and especially the United States, has always been a place individuals could turn to in pursuit of freedom to make positive changes to their lives and escape from political corruption, instability, weak and irresponsible governments, and paralyzing passivity.

Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, an émigré himself, wrote an essay on the paradox of freedom and society in the journal *Noviy Grad* (*The New City*), published in Paris by the Russian diaspora in the 1930s. He noted that Russians who were forced to move to Western Europe in the early 1900s after the Communist Revolution had to settle for lesser freedom — the material freedom of individual choices. Indeed, individual freedom was the best that the West had to offer. In Europe, young Russian immigrants were not free to change the world and create a new social order that would affect the change for everyone (while Soviets seemed to have an abundance of that freedom in Russia). Instead, Russian immigrants were only free to make choices that concerned their individual lives — what to think, say, eat, and pursue professionally. This is why, Berdyaev concluded, after some time, these immigrants complained that they no longer felt free in their new homeland.

It is hard to argue with Berdyaev on this point. I will admit that my move to the United States was primarily motivated by the pursuit of individual freedom. Nevertheless, individual freedom, however inferior, is no small thing, even if it means decision fatigue or adoption of a different way of life instead of changing the world. The process of adoption, however, is precisely that — a process of leaving behind what is known (the history, the language, the food, the people) and embracing the new and the unknown.

According to the 2013 U.S. Census Bureau, there were 40 million first-generation immigrants (born outside of the U.S.) and 36 million second-generation immigrants living in the United States.[1] Combined, they constitute almost a quarter of the total U.S. population. Most of these first-generation immigrants came to the U.S because they wanted to be Americans. Yet, the process of adapting to American life looks different for different people. America symbolizes freedom for those outside its borders because it carries a certain sense of openness to possibilities; a chance to break away from the futility devoid of meaningful change. There are those, usually younger immigrants, who fully embrace this openness, trying to reinvent themselves or fulfill all that they thought they could be in the magical land of America. Others struggle to adapt and adopt the American way of life due to their appearance, poor language proficiency, or prior cultural and religious commitments, whose ties proved stronger than they had previously thought.

I, for one, seemed to belong to the first group, not least because I emigrated from a country where those ties were already very loose. Everything was new: country, city, daily routine. Every American flag on the house or a building caught my eye because it reminded me that I was in the United States of America. I so desperately wanted to not be a Russian from Uzbekistan, to the point that I stopped cooking Russian and Uzbek food once we moved to the U.S. All the borscht and plov I have had growing up should be enough to last a lifetime. I have opened myself to the new possibilities of being someone else. I embraced the narrative of personal achievement, trying to avoid the dreaded state of being a perpetual loser. After all, is it not why I came here in the first place - to make something of myself, to use my talents and abilities to change the course of my life?

After a while, the sense of newness wore off, and I settled in the intermediate state of everyday grind punctuated by realization that not everything is "better" in America, that making something of oneself is hard work that requires sustained effort, sometimes edging dangerously close to physical and emotional exhaustion. But perhaps the most striking element of this stage was coming to terms with the fact that I remained very much an outsider lacking the history that could bind me to this land and its people.

For my immigrant self, America was a place of a new beginning. I disconnected myself from the culture and the land of my birth to start anew, only to realize that this new land has a history of its own, which it has been living out long before I arrived on its shores. It is a history of which I had no formal or intuitive knowledge, and more importantly, no sense of ownership. Knowing that, in theory, 40 million first-generation Americans could be in the same boat with me gave me a temporary sense of comfort. However, the fact that almost a quarter of the American population (including first and second-generation immigrants) has no direct link to such important events in American history as the Civil War, Abolition of Slavery, the Great Depression, etc., has enormous ramifications not only for policymaking but also for the way people form their national identity and collective self-understanding of what it means to be American.

Ever since my husband and I stepped on American soil, the local church was the primary social context where we felt a natural affinity to other people. We often moved from state to state due to my husband's medical training. Everywhere we moved, we could count on finding a faith community that would accept us as their own, based on shared beliefs and core values. There were many faithful brothers and sisters who welcomed us into their homes, shared their things, and took care of us when we lacked support from our families. Yet, even in these churches, I felt anxious about not quite fitting in because whether I liked it or not, my experience of living and practicing my Christian faith outside of the U.S. made it obvious that so much that passed as genuine Christian beliefs, biblical standards, and Christian practices in the US would make little to no sense outside of an American cultural context. This sense of dissonance only grew stronger the longer I attended churches in the U.S. We were always someone's "favorite Russians" or "Uzbekistanis," whatever that meant. I found myself gravitating towards other immigrants who shared our experiences. It was almost impossible to create lasting friendships, especially with those born in the U.S. After some time, I gave up trying entirely.

Of course, I was no longer Russian or Uzbek. I had an Uzbek nationality and Russian ethnicity that connected me to Russian culture via language, history, literature, and shared experiences. But I had no strong affinity to either of these countries, their lands, or their ethos. At the same time, I did not feel thoroughly American either, even after becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen, because living through the fall of the Soviet Union, learning to live in a newly independent state, and then coming to America forced me to look at my various experiences in the U.S. as if from the

[1] Edward Trevelyan, Christine Gambino, Thomas Gryn, Luke Larsen, Yesenia Acosta, Elizabeth Grieco, Darryl Harris, and Nathan Walters, Characteristics of the U.S. Population by Generational Status: 2013, *Current Population Report* Issued November 2016 P23-214, p. 3.

outside peering inside. There was no way around the fact that it was hard for me to be one thing, a Russian, an Uzbek, or an American. I will always be somewhere in the middle and several things at once, especially in view of my commitment to the Christian faith. No amount of outer conformity to American life could mask a certain stubborn interiority that refused to conform to the singular version of the exterior life.

This state of being is best dramatized in the final scene of Tarkovsky's *Nostalghia*, a movie about Andrei Gorchakov, a fictional Russian writer visiting Italy to research the life of an 18th-century Russian composer who lived in Italy a few years and committed suicide upon returning to Russia. In this film, we follow Andrei Gorchakov's experience of extreme alienation from everything and everyone around him, despite the apparent beauty of the Italian scenery and his female companion. Yet, at the end of the movie, he finds himself transformed by this experience and, in the same state as the subject of his research — no longer able to fit in and live in either Russia or Italy. The movie ends with Andrei Gorchakov sitting outdoors in front of his childhood home with Russian folk songs heard in the background. Then, as the camera slowly retreats and the entire scene comes into view, we realize that Andrei and the house are surrounded by the enormous Gothic walls of the Abbey of Saint Galgano, a centuries-old monastery in Tuscany. I rewatched this movie recently for the first time since we moved to the States. The ending scene left me sobbing, much to the surprise of my teenage son, who rarely saw me cry and could not quite understand why this scene caused such emotional distress.

Starting a family changes a person's life in a variety of ways. One of the most unexpected outcomes of having children born and raised in the U.S. was the effect it has had on adapting to life in America. It was no longer just about me. While I may always think of myself as somewhat of a cosmopolitan, my children helped me complete the process of binding myself to the American land. America is all my children know and can only conceive of themselves as Americans. At the same time, the seemingly mundane, yet so characteristically American daily tasks of driving on highways to work, taking children to daycare and playdates, grocery shopping, scheduling doctor's appointments and getting braces, planning for college, comprised so much of my life in the past fifteen years, that this American quotidian has become the soil in which I finally grew my roots. In the end, what made me feel part of this country was not only its idea of individual freedom but ordinary living that over time helped me accrue a personal history with this place and appreciate the life I came to live here.

As I reflected on my experience, I came to realize that I have had the chance to live in two Empires with two opposing social orders and visions of the good life. As far as I can tell, both the Soviet Union and the United States experienced different levels of success and failure in implementing and exporting these visions. Living in America, at least, gave me a chance to build a life and experience some form of freedom, however limited.

VIKA PECHERSKY STUDIES THEOLOGY AT LOYOLA UNIVERSITY MARYLAND. YOU CAN FOLLOW HER ON TWITTER @VIKAPECHERSKY.

The Case for the Christian Liberal Arts

KEVIN BROWN

Physicist Leonard Mlodinow opens his entertaining book "The Drunkard's Walk" with the story of a lottery winner whose lucky ticket ended with the number 48.[1] However, according to the contestant, luck had nothing to do with it. Claiming clairvoyance, they dreamt the number seven for seven straight nights. "And 7 x 7," the winner proudly declared, "is 48."

Mlodinow's book challenges the human proclivity to superimpose our own made-up stories onto the grid of day-to-day randomness. While elements of the book are contestable, his point that we are quick to understand and explain the world in ways that conveniently align with our ideological commitments, beliefs, and values is an observation which seems both accurate and timely.

The inclination to narrate reality in a self-serving manner seems endemic, with growing momentum in recent decades. In his 1981 book *After Virtue* — Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre described western culture as increasingly characterized by *emotivism*, or "the doctrine that all evaluative judgments are nothing but expressions of preference…of attitude or feeling."[2] Drain the world of universal norms, and moral pronouncements become mere statements about our tastes or emotions — regardless of how loud or passionate they are expressed.

In such an environment, the invitation to "reason together" appears quaint and unrealistic. Political

[1] Mlodinow, L. (2009). *The Drunkard's Walk: How Randomness Rules Our Lives.* New York: Vintage.

[2] MacIntyre, A. (2013). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Paperback ed.). London, New York: Bloomsbury (p. 13).

economist William Davies has recently argued that expertise and evidence are no longer sufficient to adjudicate disagreement.[3] Reason has been seized by emotion — and truth-claims have more to do with what is trending than what is factual. In a popular 2018 article, Andrew Sullivan suggested that politics — particularly illiberal politics — has come to be the dominant religion in the United States.[4] When political commitments ossify, arguments are evaluated based upon their conclusion (not the other way around), and nuance is tantamount to hypocrisy or betrayal. Sullivan himself is a good example of this. An outspoken Trump critic, climate activist, supporter of same-sex marriage, transgender advocate, and Biden apologist — Sullivan was fired from Vox for, in his words, being too "conservative."[5]

America's democratic project has always managed to harbor competing interests between groups and peoples, but today's rigid and hostile posture of one political group against another has heightened to a level that threatens the conditions necessary for a democracy to exist and thrive. In a Fall 2021 poll, 80% of Biden voters and 84% of Trump voters indicated that they view elected officials from the opposing party "as presenting a clear and present danger to American democracy."[6] This is beyond the "agree to disagree" kind of pluralism that has marked US history. In other words, such disdain between political parties is less like groups who see the world differently and more symptomatic of groups who see different worlds.

In a 2018 interview, former President Barack Obama named our inability to "share a common baseline of facts" as our most pressing challenge. When truth is selectively assembled — and not collectively discovered — not only does this threaten democracy, but our very capacity to live coherently.

Some might describe the problem in terms of eroding language. Three-quarters of a century ago, George Orwell suggested the word Fascism "has now no meaning except in so far as it signifies 'something not desirable.'"[8] Boogeyman expressions like *right ring, ideologue*, or *elitist* have provided intellectual off-ramps for thoughtfully engaging an idea by painting it with a generic, negative label. 20th century British author Susan Stebbing calls this "potted thinking" (named after conveniently packaged meat that lacks nourishment) — or the use of oversimplified

[3]See Davies, W. (2019). *Nervous States: Democracy and the Decline of Reason*. London: WW Norton & Co.

[4] Sullivan, A. (2018, December 8th). America's New Religions. Intelligencer. Retrieved from https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/12/andrew-sullivan-americas-new-religions.html

[5]See Davies, W. (2019). *Nervous States: Democracy and the Decline of Reason*. London: WW Norton & Co.

[6]UVA Center for Politics. (2021, September 30th). New Initiative Explores Deep, Persistent Divides Between Biden and Trump Voters. Sabato's Crystal Ball. Retrieved from https://centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/new-initiative-explores-deep-persistent-divides-between-biden-and-trump-voters/

[7]Estepa, J., & Korte, G. (2018, January 12th). Obama tells David Letterman: People no longer agree on what facts are. USA Today. Retrieved from Obama tells David Letterman: People no longer agree on what facts are

[8]Orwell, G. (n.d.). Politics and the English Language. The Orwell Foundation. Retrieved from https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/politics-and-the-english-language/

language that side-steps norms of intellectual discourse and reasoned argumentation. "We are sometimes too lazy, usually too busy, and often too ignorant," she writes, "to think out what is involved in the statements we so readily accept."[9] Not only does potted thinking avoid intellectual engagement — it signals ideological membership. Author Marilyn McEntyre suggests that reducing complex issues to trite expressions — what she calls "sloganeering"— becomes "the currency that people exchange to decide that they're in the same club."[10] As an example, in the heart of COVID-19, a board member of a large church told me mask wearers were labeled as "fear-mongers" from one group and non-mask wearers were described as "murderers" by another. Extreme language like this is thoughtless and unhelpful, yes, but it serves to signal friends and foes on the ideological battlefield.

Sloganeering is not the cause of our politically polarized landscape, but it has certainly advanced it. Moreover, social and political sorting will continue to expand through increasingly realistic "deep fake" media, news outlets whose business model elevates "clicks" over accuracy, and advanced algorithms that shock the limbic system with outrage content and unwittingly guide us into echo chambers that reinforce and rigidify our ideology. [11]

In this sense, the thoughts and judgments we possess are not necessarily "ours." Edward Bernays understood this. The nephew of Sigmund Freud opens his 1928 book "Propaganda" with this observation: "We are governed, our minds molded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of."[12] While Bernays was making a descriptive statement about human beings as inherently susceptible to emotional manipulation through clever messaging and spin, he would come to be shocked years later when he discovered that Nazis had employed his ideas in their campaign against Jews.

Aside from technology, social media, disordered business models, and misleading propaganda — humans are hardwired for this. In his account of the scientific method, Novum Organum, the influential 16th century thinker Francis Bacon outlined "Idols of the Tribe" — the innate human tendency to trust our perceptions when in reality they represent a "false mirror." In more recent decades, psychologists such as Daniel Kahneman and behavioral economists such as Richard Thaler have popularized the human proclivity toward self-serving reasoning and the tendency to interpret the world in unconsciously motivated ways. Confirmation bias is our innate inclination to look for evidence that reinforces what we already believe while dismissing evidence that does not. Simply put, we are not nearly as objective as we think — and a variety of contemporary forces only complicate the problem.

[9] Stebbing, S. (1939). *Thinking to Some Purpose.* New York: Pelican (p. 53).

[10] The Trinity Forum. (2020, July 17th). Online Conversation | Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies, with Marilyn McEntyre . Retrieved from https://www.ttf.org/portfolios/online-conversation-caring-for-words-marilyn-mcentyre/

[11] Hagey, K., & Horwitz, J. (2021, September 15th). Facebook Tried to Make Its Platform a Healthier Place. It Got Angrier Instead. . The Wall Street Journal. Retrieved from https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-algorithm-change-zuckerberg-11631654215

[12] Bernays, E. (2004). *Propaganda* (First Paperback Edition ed.). Brooklyn, New York: IG Publishing (p. 37).

To summarize, we are in a "7 x 7 = 48" kind of moment.

We might call this phenomenon *motivated narration* — our penchant to describe reality in a manner that serves our self-interested beliefs and intuitions and further isolates us to ideological enclaves. Among other things, motivated narration threatens the foundations of a free democracy and our capacity to reason together.

The outlook seems bleak, but there is hope. In such a moment it is worth highlighting key elements of Christian doctrine as a promising way forward. The faith tradition provides historic yet relevant methods of thought, speech, and practice that resist the hard-wired habits and social and technological forces that advance motivated narration and the disarray that accompanies it.

While these habits of hope are incubated in a variety of Christian settings, I offer my comments in the context of Christian higher education.

THE RELEVANT VALUE OF CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

If our minds are wired to process the world around us in unconsciously partial ways — a bias that is reinforced and accelerated by various forces — what can we do? To navigate a social, political, and cultural landscape characterized by an environment increasingly unmoored from reality and luring us to the stories we find most palatable — we need to recapture two important elements associated with thinking and knowing: self-skepticism and a healthy expression of tradition and authority.

Epistemic Humility and Skepticism of the Self

What is unique about Christian humility in education? In an RSA talk titled "Why a 21st Century Enlightenment Needs Walls" — Social Psychologist Jonathan Haidt contrasts the norms of a university with the norms of activism.[13] In the pursuit of truth, universities rely upon claims grounded in evidence, civility, persuasion, and the appraisal of various perspectives within a knowledge field. Alternatively, activism, says Haidt, does not seek truth — but change, and sometimes demolition. Regardless of its political makeup, norms of activism are characterized by shared direction, pressure or force, and unquestioned unity. Haidt suggests that social media has "breached the walls" of civil society, flooding and warping traditional university culture with narrow activist instincts.

The result is disorder. In a world that no longer shares a common pursuit of objective morality, flourishing through the fulfillment of human purpose, and the discovery of truth — moral language becomes a mask for individual preferences and social life devolves into a contest for control and power. Academia is not immune to these forces. According to Haidt, the modern campus risks exchanging the pursuit and discovery of truth with an agenda of deconstruction. Evidence gives way to feelings. Pressure replaces persuasion. Viewpoint exploration is crowded out by dogmatism. Under these conditions, it becomes impossible to reason

[13] Haidt, J. (2018, November 20th). Why a 21st Century Enlightenment Needs Walls. RSA. Retrieved from https://www.thersa.org/events/2018/11/why-a-21st-century-enlightenment-needs-walls

our way to a shared conclusion.

Civil society notwithstanding, this reality has already played out on college campuses. For example, a recent talk given by California Democrat and Attorney General Xavier Becerra was disrupted at Whittier College. Becerra was unable to answer pre-submitted questions amidst the raucous heckling of students who disapproved of his DACA immigration support. In that same year, Middlebury College students not only shouted down conservative guest speaker Charles Murray, but later attacked him and his entourage. Amidst the violence, Middlebury Professor Allison Stanger, who was set to debate Murray that evening, suffered a concussion. Later, in a *New York Times* op ed, Stanger summarized the problem: "Political life and discourse in the United States is at a boiling point, and nowhere is the reaction to that more heightened than on college campuses." [14]

So, what makes Christian education different? People of faith are often lampooned for being intolerant or narrow-minded — sometimes for good reason. However, in the way Christians traditionally *think about thinking* there are intellectual tools unique to the faith which have elevated value in this moment.

Pastor and author Tim Keller says, "What we need in this world are people that make exclusive truth claims that humble them."[15] This is a distinct element of the Christian faith. Given the Christian anthropology of sin, there is a need for humility in our understanding as well as charity toward other ideas. Humility does not deny truth or its knowability; rather, to be humble is to recognize that, left to our own devices, the wind blows toward a distorted, self-serving view of the world. In other words, a humble posture begins with a skepticism of self, recognizing that motivated narration is our default setting.

In their best-selling 2019 book *The Coddling of the American Mind*, Haidt and co-author Greg Lukianoff write about widespread cognitive distortions or "great untruths" that cripple our ability to think, reason, and live effectively together. This includes the untruth of tribalism, or the belief that "life is a battle between good people and evil people." [16]

Christians believe humanity is social by nature (the famed preacher John Wesley, for example, described humans as "relationally constituted"). Yet our desire to affiliate is susceptible to the same contaminates of sin, including the tribalistic posture of us versus them. Here, write Haidt and Lukianoff, we are tempted to embrace an identity politics that synthesizes all relations into limited categories defined by our group: right and wrong, victim and oppressed, good and evil, etc.

[14] Stanger, A. (2017, March 13th). Understanding the Angry Mob at Middlebury that Gave Me a Concussion. The New York Times. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/13/opinion/understanding-the-angry-mob-that-gave-me-a-concussion.html

[15] Keller, T. (n.d.). Is Christianity Divisive? The Veritas Forum. Retrieved from https://podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/is-christianity-divisive-tim-keller/id1210782509?i=1000497317696

[16] See Lukianoff, G., & Haidt, J. (2018). *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure.* New York: Penguin Press.

The solution to in-group favoritism and out-group antagonism is humility and commonality. Specifically, in the Christian tradition, persons of faith confess their sinful nature. In contrast to us versus them is the recognition that we *all* miss the mark. "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure," we read in Jeremiah 17. This is the human condition. Borrowing a phrase from the philosopher Immanuel Kant, we might describe this as the "crooked timber" view of humanity — a perspective consistent with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's famous expression that the line between good and evil runs through every human heart.

The fallen nature of humanity is not just one belief among many in Christianity. It is a foundational doctrine. If there is no sin, there is no need for a Savior. Remove Christ's atonement, and you effectively short-circuit the whole of the Christian faith. To be a Christian college and university is to reinforce a "crooked timber" anthropology of humankind — substantiating the doctrines, educational paradigm, practices, and mission of these institutions.

This has implications for how we understand those with different values and opinions. Humility affords space for what theologian Miroslav Volf has called "double vision" — or the practice of "seeing with the eyes of the others, accepting their perspective, and discovering the new significance of one's own basic commitments."[17] As recipients of grace, Christians are taught to extend grace to others. "When we are looking at each other through the sights of our guns," writes Volf, "we see only the rightness of our own cause."[18]

All of humankind is fallen, and all bear God's image. This epistemic commitment is woven into the fabric of teaching, curriculum, and practice at faith-based institutions. It paints a picture of people possessing both a common need (fallenness) and a common dignity (Imago Dei). *All* fall short. *All* need a Savior. *All* are invited to God's table. *All* are recipients of God's grace.

In addition to how we understand others, humility affords us epistemic tools that are indispensable to learning. An intellectual posture of self-suspicion relies upon traditional norms of truth-seeking: robust methodology, corroborating evidence, logic, deductive argumentation, and the discipline of self-interrogation. Importantly, these norms protect against a reliance upon our own way of seeing the world, mediated through what William Blake pessimistically referred to as "the dim windows of the soul."

Related to humility is the Christian virtue of charity. "True [viewpoint] diversity requires generosity of spirit" says Haidt.[19] Charity is not blind acceptance, just as tolerance does not suspend judgment. If truth has no fear of investigation, as Christians claim, then charity is the virtue that explores the merits of other viewpoints without wholesale acceptance or rejection. Charity allows us to entertain an idea without adopting it.

[17] Volf, M. (2010). *Exclusion and Embrace.* Nashville: Abingdon Press (pp. 213-214)

[18] Ibid, p. 215

[19] Haidt, J. (2017). Viewpoint Diversity in the Academy. Retrieved from https://jonathanhaidt.com/viewpoint-diversity/\

A recent national survey found that Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) students experienced more exposure to diverse ideas than their secular counterparts.[20] Specifically, two-thirds of CCCU Seniors indicated course discussions and assignments at their institutions deliberately incorporated diverse political, religious, racial, ethnic, and gender perspectives. More directly related to the notion of humility, CCCU students also scored highest among other universities for "examining the strengths and weaknesses of their own views on a topic or issue."

Beyond coronavirus, this season may equally be known for what Arthur Brooks describes as "the pandemic of contempt."[21] With the potential to be harvested in Christian education, humility is not just a virtue, it is an antidote. "Blessed are the peacemakers" Jesus said in his most famous sermon. But peacemaking in a contemptuous, polarized atmosphere will require a humble and charitable life of the mind that flows against the currents of today's discourse. "The robust Christian thought that is fostered and embraced at [Christian colleges and universities]," writes Biola University President Barry Corey, "is not just good for Christianity; it's good for society."[22]

Embracing Tradition and Authority

Years ago, in a conversation with a teacher who worked for a Christian institution, we discussed complicated social and political issues that arise in the classroom and how to best navigate those topics with students. Lowering their voice, they confessed, "I tell students, this is the school's position on such and such a topic — but here is what I personally believe." As I listened to their rationale, it was clear they viewed their employer's theological commitments and the Christian tradition it represented as something that must be transcended or even escaped — a heavy yolk that was both oppressive and outdated. I asked them to consider what their institution's Christian identity would be like if every teacher eschewed tradition and advised students along the lines of "what was right in their own eyes." Would such an environment be helpful or harmful? After all, what does it mean for an institution, educational or otherwise, to carry the moniker *Christian*?

The teacher's attitude seems to mirror the allergic reaction many have to notions of tradition and authority. On one level, this response is understandable. The idea of tradition strikes us as stuffy and outdated — a thoughtless tendency to do something for no other reason than "this is the way we have always done it" or what John Stuart Mill called "the despotism of custom." Related, appeals to authority seem to carry an implication of asymmetrical power imbalances, inevitably leading to various injustices. Indeed, for many throughout the world, words like tradition and authority evoke images of harmful human practices such as honor killings, gender discrimination, female genital mutilation, housing segregation, and unequal voting rights.

[20] The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities. (2018). The Case for Christian Higher Education. CCCU. Retrieved from https://www.cccu.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/2018-Case-for-CHE_WEB_pages.pdf

[21] Brooks, A. (2019). *Love Your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from Our Culture of Contempt.* New York: Broadside Books.

[22] Barry H. Corey, "Christian Colleges and Universities Are Good for Society," Amazon Web Services, 2016, http://lpc-docs.s3.amazonaws.com/ lpc_docs_BarryCorey_op-ed.pdf.

During a Harvard panel on justice, historian Niall Ferguson said the word "virtue" — for all its positive imagery — reminded him of Robespierre. Dictating singular moral ends in a pluralistic society has a violent history. "At the bottom of republican virtues," says Ferguson, "you send people to the guillotine."[23]

These concerns are entirely legitimate. Some traditions are misguided, wrong, harmful, or even downright bloody. The abuse of authority occurs with striking regularity. And the effort to conserve and enforce certain societal values will always flirt with heavy-handed coercion or state perfectionist solutions.

But the response to such abuses should not attempt to escape, ignore, or dismiss tradition. Here is why. First, skepticism or antagonism against tradition fosters naïvely anachronistic thinking — the belief that we completely and accurately discern the truth now, while those before us did not. As a conversation starter with students, I like to point out how clear the atrocities and injustices of antebellum slavery or Jim Crow laws are to us today. "So, what are we missing now," I ask, "leading future generations to critique us and our blindness?" In other words, if the folly of those who have gone before us is obvious, will not those after us equally identify our errors? Are we not also blind to sins unique to our moment?

Second, if we rebuff the authorities outside of ourselves — this assumes *we* are the authority. For those who believe that tradition is something to be sloughed off, this seems a curious, if not dubious, assumption. One need not subscribe to doctrines of original sin or innate human fallibility to recognize a common historical stream of individual abuses of power and personal moral failures. In spite of the rugged individualism and Promethean hero myths that characterize the narrative arc of Western Enlightenment, history offers no shortage of cautionary examples that would suggest, contra William Ernest Henly's red-blooded expression, we are not "masters of our fate; captains of our soul." Lord Acton's famous aphorism proves timeless: "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

There are better, more fruitful ways to think about tradition and authority. In his essay "Sinsick", theologian Stanley Hauerwas invites readers to imagine a medical student informing their supervisor they are not really "into" anatomy. Rather, they would like to focus on people and therefore take another course in psychiatry. Predictably, writes Hauerwas, they would swiftly be told: "We do not care what you are 'into.' Take anatomy or ship out." [24]

This is a virtue of medical schools because people "believe an inadequately trained doctor might hurt them." In other words, we would be highly skeptical to use a surgeon who cobbled together their own medical curriculum, fly on an airplane engineered in non-traditional ways, or inhabit a building whose architects broke ranks with conventional building processes. Why? Because these authorities and traditions matter for our health and safety. Would we not think about our own social, intellectual, and moral development in the same way? As Tish Harrison Warren

[23] Ireland, C. (2009, September 9th). Getting justice right. The Harvard Gazette. Retrieved from https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2009/09/getting-justice-right/

[24] Hauerwas, S. (2000). Sinsick. In C. Braaten, & R. Jenson, *Sin, Death, and the Devil* (pp. 7-21). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (p. 9).

summarizes, "We need to be as discerning in whom we trust with care of souls as we are with care of our bodies."[25]

Not only does tradition provide the scaffolding to govern and guide our minds, bodies, and souls — it provides a grand narrative in which to participate. The Christian tradition is not just collected doctrine — it is a story. In contrast to Bertrand Russell's declaration that we are "an accidental collocation of atoms", Nathaniel Hawthorne's dreary description of life as a "frantic steeplechase toward nothing" or Albert Camus' suggestion that the human lot is not unlike Sisyphus meaninglessly rolling a rock up and down a hill for eternity — the Christian story is a reminder that humans are created and inhabit a created order; that we are embodied and embedded *teleological* creatures. Here, life is not "a tale told by an idiot…signifying nothing" — but directional, purposeful, and meaningful— characterized by a narrative logic.

Biblical scholar NT Wright describes history as a multi-act play — a grand narrative that we enter during a particular time and place. But, he reminds us, our lives are not constituted by infinite spontaneity. Our agency — or "improvisation" — occurs within a storyline. Wright's metaphor is reminiscent of Alasdair MacIntyre's narrative portrayal of personhood and action. We enter a play, he says, that was not of our making — a drama where actors play "subordinate parts in the dramas of others, and each drama constrains the others."[26]

The belief in, or desire for, an unbridled, unencumbered self is not only foolish, but impossible. We are all beholden to tradition and authority in some form — the question is "what tradition?" and "whose authority?"

The Christian tradition that situates us within a larger metanarrative of creation, meaning, and purpose — and impels adherents to "empty" themselves for a life of service and sacrifice out of love of God and neighbor. David Brooks, who has written about the telos crisis[27] in America, described the cultural value of Christian higher education in a recent address to leaders of Christian colleges and universities:

You have what everybody else is desperate to have: a way of talking about and educating the human person in a way that integrates faith, emotion and intellect. You have a recipe to nurture human beings who have a devoted heart, a courageous mind and a purposeful soul.[28]

Put differently, Brooks is saying *you have a tradition* — and in that tradition is hope, guidance, and goodness.

For Christian institutions of higher education, tradition is not something to escape — it sets the stage for our participation in a larger story

[25] Warren, T. H. (2017, April 27th). Who's In Charge of the Christian Blogosphere? Christianity Today. Retrieved from https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/april-web-only/whos-in-charge-of-christian-blogosphere.html

[26] MacIntyre, A. (2013). *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Paperback ed.). London, New York: Bloomsbury (p. 248).

[27] Brooks, D. (2017, March 21st). The Unifying American Story. The New York Times. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/21/opinion/the-unifying-american-story.html

[28] Brooks, D. (2016). The Cultural Value of Christian Higher Education. Council of Christian Colleges and Universities Magazine. Retrieved from https://www.cccu.org/magazine/cultural-value-christian-higher-education/

— or what C.S. Lewis understood as a "finely choreographed dance."[29] To experience freedom, identity, meaning, significance, and purpose, is — in this sense — to learn the "steps to the dance." Christian colleges and universities recognize that students are not just *res cogitans* — "thinking things" — but multifaceted beings constituted by faculties and affections who inhabit a story that guides their formative direction.

MISSIONAL SPIRIT AND PUBLIC LIFE

In 1954, Darrell Huff authored what has come to be the most popular book on data analysis ever written: *How to Lie with Statistics.*[30] Huff's bestseller was a witty corrective written against a cultural atmosphere that was *over*-reliant on data, science, and expert information. As economist Tim Harford writes, in the decades since writing his book, Huff's cynicism seems to be the standard response to reasoning upon our world — not the exception:

"It's not that we feel every statistic is a lie, but that we feel helpless to pick out the truths," writes Harford. "So we believe whatever we want to believe…and for the rest we adopt Huff's response: a harsh laugh, a shrug, or both."[31]

Harford puts his finger on our present moment — we are not a society overly dependent upon scientism and data to adjudicate truth; we are, alternatively, over-dependent and over-confident in our self-authorizing vision of the world. As argued, the pitfalls of this reliance, and the motivated narration it fosters, can be addressed through a humble self-skepticism and the guardrails of tradition.

At this point, a mindful reader may predictably and legitimately raise an obvious critique. It is not clear that contemporary expressions of the Christian faith — in its institutions of higher education, churches, and other various ministries — has successfully embraced and embodied the aforementioned attributes to best address or escape the problem of motivated narration.

Where US culture used to — at worst — view Christians as strange or puritanical, today people of faith are often vilified as narrow, polarizing, or hateful. The future of all private education hinges on reputation, but Christian higher education has its own perception challenges.

One challenge is intellectual. In the nearly three decades after historian Mark Noll wrote "The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind" — his book tracing the erosion of critical thinking and reason in modern evangelicalism — what has changed? According to journalist Michael Luo, not much. In a recent *New Yorker* article, Luo suggests that Evangelicalism has come to be defined by anti-intellectualism — not robust norms of truth seeking or the thoughtful guidance of generational voices from within our tradition.[32] In contrast, Evangelicalism today reflects a cultural amnesia associated with fantastical conspiracy theories or prophecy hued in politics.

[29] Howard, T. (n.d.). The "Moral Mythology" of C. S. Lewis. Retrieved from https://memoriacollege.org/the-moral-mythology-of-c-s-lewis/

[30] Harford, T. (2022). *The Data Detective: Ten Easy Rules to Make Sense of Statistics* . New York: Riverhead Books (p. 11).

[31] Harford, T. (2022). *The Data Detective: Ten Easy Rules to Make Sense of Statistics* . New York: Riverhead Books (p. 11).

[32] Luo, M. (2021, March 4th). The Wasting of the Evangelical Mind. The New Yorker. Retrieved from https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/the-wasting-of-the-evangelical-mind

In January of 2021, an American Enterprise Institute survey found that a staggering 27% of white evangelicals described QAnon conspiracy theories as "completely or mostly accurate."[33] More recently, findings from the 2021 American Values Survey revealed top issues of concern for self-described white evangelicals to be terrorism, immigration, and the federal deficit (concerns that correlate poorly to the priorities of Jesus Christ and the early church).[34]

A related challenge for faith-based schools is defining what the moniker "Christian" means. It is increasingly difficult to understand Christians as a monolithic group constituted by a uniform tradition of shared aims and practices. In recent years, the word "Evangelical" has been critically analyzed for its increasing ambiguity. Political analyst Ross Douthat and scholar Darren Guerra describe various "fault lines" or sub-categories among those who profess to be an evangelical.[35] At a more granular level, Michael Graham has identified six fractures that characterize a recent sorting process in evangelicalism — from the "neo-fundamentalist evangelical" to the "ex-vangelical" who has left the church and the faith.[36]

These are challenges both for Christian higher education and for the church — and they are significant. Yet these challenges do not necessarily illuminate the contamination of Christian tradition so much as they signal its absence. At the heart of the Christian doctrine is the recognition that we are fallen, sinfully self-centered, and in need of a savior. Among other things, this anthropological understanding is a recognition of our proclivity to motivated narration and our innate desires to affix ourselves to politically palatable views that align with our preferences. We all have the innate tendency to proclaim that "7 x 7 = 48."

Striking as these challenges are, they do not invalidate the need for a humble thought life cultivated in Christian tradition so much as they demand its renewal and expression. Institutions of Christian higher education have a unique opportunity to lean into timeless doctrinal elements of their faith tradition — which have a timely relevance to our present 21st Century moment and the self-governance necessary for our nation to function and flourish.

This speaks to a final point to be made about the value of Christian colleges and universities — the missional spirit they cultivate in their students. Students from Christian schools are compelled to bend the universe in favor of the common good — neighbor, widow, orphan, and alien. Motivated by the conviction that all people are made in God's image, students prepare themselves to serve humanity through creativity, imagination,

[33] Jenkins, J. (2021, February 11th). QAnon Conspiracies Sway Faith Groups, Including 1 in 4 White Evangelicals . Christianity Today. Retrieved from https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/february/white-evangelicals-qanon-election-conspiracy-trump-aei.html

[34] PRRI Staff. (2021, November 1st). Competing Visions of America: An Evolving Identity or a Culture Under Attack? Findings from the 2021 American Values Survey. Retrieved from https://www.prri.org/research/competing-visions-of-america-an-evolving-identity-or-a-culture-under-attack/

[35] Guerra, D. (2018, January 15th). Donald Trump and the Evangelical "Crisis". First Things. Retrieved from https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2018/01/donald-trump-and-the-evangelical-crisis

[36] Graham, M. (2021, June 7th). The Six Way Fracturing of Evangelicalism. Mere Orthodoxy. Retrieved from https://mereorthodoxy.com/six-way-fracturing-evangelicalism/

compassion, love, and the excellence of their work.

Christian schools have come to be synonymous with service. In 2020, the think-tank Cardus produced a higher education report revealing that approximately two-thirds of students from Christian colleges indicated that entering jobs which "directly help others" was a high priority — a figure greater than students at non-Christian schools. The study also found a heightened sense of moral obligation, attention to creation care, and the fulfillment of vocational calling for Christian college students. CCCU schools prepare their graduates to enter a broad range of job fields, but perhaps more importantly, they inspire a sense of moral commitment in a coherent, faithful manner.[37]

While not limited to these areas, Christian schools have an opportunity to serve through the modeling of humility-inspired norms of truth seeking and through tradition-impelled meaning and purpose — not simply as a salve to heal the motivated narration that marks our public discourse — but as a service compelled by faith in God and Christian doctrine.

This is not a call to 'Christianize' all institutions — but it is an argument that Christian colleges and universities have an important role to play in public life. A liberal democracy presupposes disagreement, but it also presupposes persuasion. Underneath persuasion is the implicit assumption that some ideas are superior to others. The pursuit of truth has always been a fundamental property of liberal education—and in our present condition of fractured discourse and motivated narration—Christian schools provide a unique value. Or, as C.S. Lewis once observed, Christians who made noteworthy contributions in this world were "precisely those who thought most of the next."

KEVIN BROWN IS THE PRESIDENT OF ASBURY UNIVERSITY.

[37] Cheng, A., & Sikkink, D. (2020, February 10th). What Do They Deliver? A Report on American Colleges and Universities. Cardus. Retrieved from https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/what-do-they-deliver/

FOOD AND THE LIFE OF NATIONS

MICHAEL WEAR

We are not simply the users of creation; we are, all of us, called to be its offerers. The world will be lifted, as it was always meant to be, by our priestly love. We can, you see, take it with us. It will be precisely because we loved this Old Jerusalem of a world enough to bear it in our bones that its textures will ascend when we rise; it will be because our eyes have relished the earth that the colors of its countries will compel our hearts forever. The bread and pastry, the cheeses, the wines, and the songs go into the *Supper of the Lamb*, because we do: it is our love that brings the City home.

Robert Farrar Capon, Preface to the Second and Third Editions, The Supper of the Lamb

I have felt out of place for much of my life. I was adopted as an infant to parents who divorced when I was five years old. I knew little about where I came from for most of my life. What I did know, what I needed to know, was that I was Italian. I looked Italian enough. My adopted family — on my mother's side, which is the only side I've ever really known — was Italian. What I could rely on throughout my childhood was Sunday dinner, the urgent joy with which my grandmother would feed us and watch us eat. Growing up, the food melded with the religion melded with the family melded with "being Italian," so that it was difficult to know where one ended and the other began. The limited medical information I had about my birth parents also indicated I was Italian. Italian enough, at least. It was something to hold onto.

I held on tighter after my grandfather, my dearest friend, died, and I moved away for college. In a new place, with new people, my upbringing as an Italian-American became more obvious and distinctive to me. I was no longer with my Italian-American family every day, and so it was mooring to more strongly embrace my Italian identity. I married at 23-years old, and my wife, German by ethnic background, was amenable to my being Italian and to our claiming that as a family. There's a long history of happy Italian-German marriages, the romanticism of the Italian grounded by the steady realism of the German. We have had the opportunity to travel to Italy several times as a couple, bringing my eldest daughter with us on one of our most recent trips. These trips are

meaningful to me. As soon as I return from a trip to Italy, I am thinking about how I might get back.

Yet, the tighter my grip, the more elusive it all feels. I don't speak Italian, with the exception of a few dozen phrases and whatever sticks from my intermittent Duolingo sprees. My last name isn't Italian, which opens me to inquisitive, bemused questions from acquaintances about just how Italian I am.

What am I chasing? The traditions of my adopted family, which was fairly Americanized by the time I was born? Some connection to my birth family? The Italian-American life that is portrayed and available to me through commercial presentations and media? Or am I pursuing the Old Country, Italy proper?

The family folklore is that my Grandfather's legal name, "Ciro," was actually meant to be "Giro," but his mother's handwriting was so poor and the hospital staff so unfamiliar with Italian names that it was "Ciro" that went on the birth certificate. My grandfather would seem uncomfortable and uncertain to me when this was raised, despite the familial conjectures of others in the family. He rarely went by Ciro. Like many Italians and other immigrants, he went by an "Americanized" first name to avoid what discrimination he could.

I came to learn that Ciro is actually a common Italian name. There's the footballer, Ciro Immobile. Several years ago, my wife and I read a story in the newspaper about a boy, Ciro, who was rescued from the rubble of an earthquake that hit Ischia, where we spent part of our honeymoon. We gave my second daughter the middle name "Ciro" to honor my grandfather, and also, I suppose, to extend his influence in my life and the attachment of my life to his… Still, I have wondered: What if my great-grandmother did intend to name my grandfather "Giro?" Was I reclaiming my Italian heritage by giving my child the middle name "Ciro," or reifying the distortion of my great-grandmother's intentions?

There is a real and serious history of discrimination and prejudice against Italians in American history, but it feels foolish and trivial to talk about any bias against Italians today. The idea of discrimination against Italians is itself a common joke. Italians complaining about discrimination against Italians was a dominant theme and source of comedy throughout the show *The Sopranos*. In the conclusion of one episode of the show, which focused on debates over Columbus Day, Tony Soprano issued one of the more strident moral judgments the show ever made as Tony rejected appeals to Italian identity as a source of embattled aggrievement and constant offense.

I find very little to be offended about as an Italian. I've wondered, in my life, if comments about my hair or my temperament, for instance, were less personal and more based in prejudicial stereotypes, but my Italian heritage — my Italianness, or lack thereof — is more a source of joy and melancholy, than pride and antagonism. Still, I feel a strange pull when I think about the fact that my grandfather only got in one fistfight in his life, that I know of, and it was because someone called him a "dago." I remember hearing this story as a boy and thinking, *I don't know what that word means, but if it was enough to upset my grandfather, it should be enough to upset me.* I wondered as a boy what I would do if someone ever called me that, and imagined myself defending, not my honor really, but my grandfather's — an honor that was, it seems, vulnerable to the disparagement of his ethnicity. Is this readiness to defend — or is it a readiness to take offense? — a gift or a burden? Is it virtue or is it sin?

-"Italy is made, now let us make Italians," proclaimed statesman Massimo d'Azeglio following Italy's reunification in 1861. About fifty years later, my great-grandfather would come to the United States as a teenager, and he would become an Italian-American. Yet, it is likely that he did not consider himself primarily as an "Italian" when he made the journey as an adolescent, but rather as a "Sicilian." The Italian migration to the United States of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries was one not of Italians, so much as a migration of Calabrians, Neapolitans, Sicilians. It was in America, to a great extent, that they became Italian.

Central to this creative enterprise was food. According to Simone Cinotto, Professor of History at the University of Gastronomic Studies in Pollenzo and author of *The Italian American Table: Food, Family and Community in New York City*, this can be attributed to three reasons: "the power of food to create and support family and community in a world of cultural and material stress," "the importance of the food trade in the Italian immigrant economy," and "the symbolic value of food…that helped Italians understand who they were and whom they aspired to be." Food shaped Italian identity and made possible a "diasporic Italian nation."

Virginia Yans-McLaughlin's study of Italians in Buffalo, my hometown, found that while it had been assumed that industrial work patterns were associated with "Old World family ways…the evidence that we have on the Italians in Buffalo seriously challenges this conventional model." For these families, "the nuclear family pattern proved remarkably resilient." This resilience persevered through significant hardship, the very kind in which many scholars identified as causes of family disorganization. In addition to the inherent difficulties involved in migration, which often resulted in at least temporary family separation, "until the prosperous 1920s…(Italian families in Buffalo) experienced the hardships of urban poverty," including: "segregated…substandard housing" where they were constantly exposed to infectious disease; high infant mortality rates; and high rates of unemployment and underemployment, due in part to employment discrimination. Italian families faced a number of other formal and informal pressures. Cinotto, citing the work of Leonard Covello, a scholar who studied Italian American children and families in New York City in the first half of the twentieth-century, explains that "too many forces encouraged an individualism that threatened the family: public institutions, popular culture, and the mass media. The children's scorn for immigrant culture, which public schools instilled and fostered, had weakened and disoriented their parents' authority."

According to Cinotto, it was in this pressure-cooker of economic hardship and cultural pressures to "Americanize," that the Italian American dining table emerged by the 1930s as an intergenerational compromise. "Through these intrafamilial negotiations," Cinotto writes, "domestic rituals centered on food created private spaces for the building of group ideology and the cultural transmission of values." Concessions would be made to a certain level of Americanization so that their children could thrive in the broader public world, but "in return for recognizing these changes, first-generation Italian immigrants asked their children to declare their commitment and devotion to a private ethnic sphere through ritual and symbolic actions." Food was central to this approach: regular dinner with the family (especially on Sundays), extravagant (relative to their economic station) feasts for religious holidays, and a developing cuisine which was inspired by the food of their hometowns in Italy,

but made to accommodate the ingredients that were available to them in America.

In his book, *Blood of my Blood: The Dilemma of Italian-Americans*, Richard Gambino writes, "To the Italian-American, food is symbolic both of life and of life's chief medium for human beings, the family. I remember the attitude conveyed to me as a child by the adults in my family, immigrants and second generation, that the waste or abuse of food was a sin. I was made to feel that food was the host of life, and not in any remote or abstract sense. It was the product of my father's (or grandfather's or uncle's, etc.) labor, prepared for us with care by my mother or grandmother, or aunt, etc.). It was, in a very emotional sense, a connection with my father and my mother, an outreach by them toward me. In a very poignant way, meals were a 'communion' of the family, and food was 'sacred' because it was the tangible medium of that communion."

This is how I experienced life growing up, the way in which food seemed to express and implicate everything else. If anything was left on someone's plate, my grandmother would half-tease, half-plead with them that they had "left the best part." The morsel of meat stuck to the end of a rib that had spent the day in a simmering pot of sauce? The best part. The starchy broth leftover from a bowl of macaroni and peas? The best part. This sentiment conveyed the importance of not wasting food, as well as the care with which it was made. It also expressed the care you were subject to when you were eating. My mother worked two and sometimes three jobs for much of my childhood, and I spent much of my childhood without supervision. Food, though, was when we gathered. It was the occasion for care.

The most comforting things my mother would cook for me as a child were the simplest. I loved my mother's ditalini with the egg (the "the" in the name of the dish is mandatory), especially when I was sick. She would tell me it was a "Great Depression" dish, what the Italians would call piatto povere, and she would say this with awe: an awe that her parents, and her parents' parents, could do so much with so little. How could a dish made with six ingredients, including water, salt and pepper, be so delicious, comforting and edifying? Her parents and grandparents built a life in America through sacrifice and creativity, and with very little they were able to make a good life for themselves and their family. These meals, this food, represented that history. What an inheritance!

Food, family, and religion are all entangled for Italian-Americans. So much of the food we ate was directly tied to various Catholic holidays. Were we gathering for church? For a meal? For family? It's impossible to locate any one source, any singular motivation. Sometimes it was, "the family was together so we might as well eat," other times, it was "we have to eat so we might as well get together." The presence of religion seemed to sacralize all of it.

There is the sense-making that goes into the construction of identity and the making of the "diasporic nation" of Italians, and then there is the sense-making that comes after. One might have hoped that when a wave of Puerto Rican and Black residents arrived in Harlem in the 1930s and 40s, second-generation Italian American immigrants in Harlem would have found reason for solidarity with these newcomers within their own history in America. Instead, these Italians, whose grandparents were subject to prejudice by Northern Italians and whose parents faced significant discrimination in America, reacted with a "preoccupation with color…born out of insecurity and feelings of inadequacy." Cinotto's

book recounts how the Italian American identity that was built in conditions of ostracism, poverty and racism against Italians (who were not deemed white in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth-century in America), could be leveraged for commercial and status gain and prop up feelings of superiority and disdain toward others. Prior to the first World War, Cinotto notes, social workers, public school officials and others denounced the Italian diet, and Italian immigrant culture generally was disparaged by those in authority. But less than a couple of decades later, Italian Americans in East Harlem would look to other communities and make similar judgments.

It is difficult, it seems, to form a group identity that is and remains positive. Instead, any point of pride easily turns into a point of superiority. I like the stories of Tony Bennett (His real name is Anthony Dominick Benedetto, but he was told to Americanize his name to appeal more broadly) singing in Selma during the marches at the request of Harry Belafonte, or Frank Sinatra singing "Ol Man River" at an NAACP gala and bringing Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to tears. These stories suggest to me the ability to find solidarity and empathy in our identities. Instead, too often, one group's identification with their "work ethic," quickly leads to the belief other groups are "lazy." One group's "family values" leads to the belief others must not really care for their families. A narrative of perseverance through discrimination and hardship can harden hearts toward the struggles others face.

Just as food can be the subject of group pride and inter-group disparagement and prejudice, the intersection of food and identity is attractive in the political realm. While Italian immigrants were making a nation for themselves, the nation they left still sought their affections and loyalty. The Italian government, particularly its fascist iteration after 1922, appealed explicitly to Italian-Americans to purchase imported Italian goods as a way of expressing pride and providing tangible support to the nation they left behind.

Food is still a salient subject in politics. In Italy, right-wing populists have made the preservation of food traditions central to their appeal to voters. In 2019, the Pope was criticized by a prominent conservative Catholic writer, Antonio Socci, for serving pork-free lasagna to the poor, as was Bologna's Archbishop Matteo Zuppi for leaving the meat out of tortellini. For Socci, pork is as central to "Italian civilization" as "wine and parmesan." Matteo Salvini, the former Deputy Prime Minister of Italy and former leader of the far-right League Party, has frequently turned to food for his political appeals, including an announcement that he was boycotting Nutella once he learned the hazelnuts in Nutella come from Turkey, not Italy. The slogan of the League in the late 1990s was "Yes to polenta, no to couscous." The anti-Muslim sentiment of these appeals is always implicit, and often explicit.

It is easy to dismiss the power of these kinds of appeals as xenophobic trivialities that should be easily rejected by any moral, decent person, but to do so is to fail to appreciate how profoundly food makes up the lives (economic, familial, cultural) and identities of voters. In the case of Italy, and any economy in which tourism looms large, the prospect of the loss of national identity brings with it the threat of the loss of a critical good: an image and expectation of what the nation is that can be valued more highly by those outside of the nation than within it. Any successful tour guide will tell you that many travelers wish not to experience Italy as it is, but what they imagine it to be. When a culture is commodified, what is authentic becomes difficult to parse out.

It should not be difficult to understand why political appeals to identity – through issues related to food or any other–can be so powerful and effective. A politics of unmediated self-expression, which is not only the kind of politics we've built, but the kind of political engagement which is often held up as the very model of citizenship, will inevitably be a politics of identity. An effort to build a healthy identity politics through the construction of positively-framed identities is doomed. As noted earlier, once positively-framed identities regularly and quickly fuel the degradation of those who are not willing or able to take up that identity.

Issues related to identity will never be absent from our politics, of course. In fact, it is hard to conceive of what would make up such a politics. Still, we can recognize the ways in which identity is implicated in and by our politics, without totally giving ourselves over to that facet of our politics. We need, instead, a buffered politics, which does not so casually utilize identity as a political weapon. We need buffered people, who do not so easily and eagerly hand over the power of identity to politics. In diverse societies like ours, we need a politics of self-consciously pluralistic self-governance.

I recently visited the Italian Dolomites, and was surprised to find that the further north I went — from Trento to Bolzano to Merano — though I stayed in Italy, it was no longer "Italian." That is, though governed by Italy, this was a different Italy than I had known before. On signage, including traffic signage, German language came first, with Italian second. The menus featured not pasta, but canederli, a kind of dumpling. There was an identification not just with Italy or the European Union, but with a distinctive South Tyrolean culture. Where was I? Who was I to say that the Italy of Trento or Merano was any less Italian than that of Bologna or Puglia? If a nation is to be a nation it must make room for all its cities, and really, for all its people.

"Identity…is not inscribed in the genes of a people or in the ancient history of their origins," writes Massimo Montanari, in his book *Italian Identity in the Kitchen, Or Food and the Nation*, "but is constructed historically through the day-to-day dynamic of exchanges between individuals, experiences and different cultures. The Italianness of pasta, or the tomato, or the chili pepper (or pasta with tomato sauce seasoned with chili pepper) is indisputable. But it is also indisputable that pasta, tomato and chili pepper belong in *origin* to other cultures and it is necessary to dig in space as well as in time to recapture the fragments of the various histories that in the end interlock and give rise to new histories and identities."

-

Last year, my family moved to Baltimore. My second daughter was born here, and it feels like home to us. Which is to say, it reminds us of Buffalo. I like walking with my daughters around Little Italy, past the Catholic Church that stood as the center of social and communal life for the community for so long, past the Bocce court that is maintained by the Sons of Italy, past the plaques honoring Mayor Thomas D'Alesandro Jr., whose daughter, Nancy Pelosi, would go on to be the highest ranking Italian American to ever serve in elected office. On one walk, I met a woman who was sitting on a bench outside of her home, a house that her family had owned for over a hundred years. She told me about the neighborhood, and kept commenting on my hair, and my daughter's hair, and my daughter's blue eyes which would not be Italian except for the fact that my daughter is mine and I have

claimed her, eyes included, as such.

I learned something that took my breath away in a casual conversation with my mother recently. A century ago, when my great-grandfather arrived in America, it was Baltimore's port that first welcomed him. I have spent so much time, so much money, so much emotion in pursuit of something true about myself, and it has led me unwittingly to the very city that welcomed my great-grandfather at the beginning of his journey to build a new future, a future that was there for me. Perhaps this was it, the story that is robust enough to end my chasing, my searching, after something I know doesn't exist.

-

I live in a house with a three-year-old who is in preschool, which is another way of saying that we have a cold constantly cycling through our little family. I was working one day, when my eldest daughter came up to me, sniffling, asking for something to eat. I knew just the thing to make her.

I pulled a chair up close to the counter so that she could help. I put some salted water on the stove to boil, while she cracked a couple eggs into a bowl. She is an excellent egg-cracker. When the water boiled, I poured in ditalini and we waited for the pasta to get just right. Reserving a cup of pasta water, I drained the pasta and returned it to the pot, along with some of the reserved pasta water. My daughter tossed in the eggs she had prepared. I stirred quickly, and you must stir quickly, and added in some more of the reserved water. I added a healthy pinch of black pepper. I grabbed a couple of bowls from our cabinet, and spooned the ditalini into the bowls, covering the pasta with grated parmesan.

Six ingredients, including water, put together with attention and care. A meal created to satisfy even in a time of serious constraints; a meal that filled my mother with awe for what her parents sacrificed, that was passed on to her son who was grafted into that promise; a son who found his way back to Baltimore, where he didn't know he came from, serving the meal that had sustained generations with nourishment and love and care. I looked at my daughter, enjoying what we had made together. I thought of my grandparents, who would watch over me as I ate. *What an incredible life I have been given, I thought. It is too much for me to care for myself. I must entrust it to God, just as I have entrusted her to God.* She looked up at me, smiling, wild-eyed, almost done with her bowl of ditalini.

"Oh, my dear," I said. "You must finish. This is the best part."

MICHAEL WEAR IS THE FOUNDER OF PUBLIC SQUARE STRATEGIES AND AUTHOR OF RECLAIMING HOPE: LESSONS LEARNED IN THE OBAMA WHITE HOUSE ABOUT THE FUTURE OF FAITH IN AMERICA.

Who is this New Man?:

THE SHADOW OF AMERICAN IDENTITY IN EARLY NATIONAL LITERATURE

ASHLEY HALES

The rubber band of our American common life is stretched to breaking. Our connections are tenuous, our politics polarizing, and our sense of civic housekeeping — where we provide for others for the common good — seems like a foreign language we studied in high school, but now retain a vocabulary of just a few words. When we find ourselves unable to speak across our divides, what can help us travel across?

Metaphors are ferries. The etymological roots of the word mean "to carry something over." Think of it this way: on one shore a word or idea hops on and the ferry brings it across. On the other shore, the idea hops off and makes sense of itself in a new place where its shape might morph or shift. Metaphors are in the business of making the familiar strange again. They wake up our imaginations to travel new paths instead of the well-worn wheel ruts we often travel in our heads. They help us begin to see webs of relation.

The metaphors we use to talk about American identity are like overgrown ivy that we need to begin pulling off the brick of our common life, but they hold on tight. Once Americans had declared their independence from Great Britain, we quickly divided the world into two categories: us and them. We created stories where our heroes were frontiersmen pushing past boundaries of civilization and exploration, outsiders like Huck Finn who had to "light out for the territory," and in the 20th century, astronauts and politicians who conquered frontiers. Our metaphors and stories of American identity are about the lone, intrepid male individual, defying the odds and conquering anyone or anything who gets in his way.

This language of exploration mutated and shifted into metaphors of war to define American identity. The language of war may be helpful when we are in actual wars, but when everything a person disagrees with is couched in war-like terms, we become fighters instead of problem-solvers.There have been culture wars, wars on poverty, a war on drugs and a war on terror. More recently, Trump called himself a war-time president, likening the COVID-19 pandemic to World War II. But things like poverty, incarceration,

[1] Much of the original research appears in my Ph.D. thesis: "Sympathy and Transatlantic Literature: place, genre, and emigration" (Ph.D. in English, University of Edinburgh, 2013).

terrorism, and a health emergency aren't things we can fight or quickly win. They are complex, systemic, and interconnected issues. When we use the language of war, we're unlikely to pull back layers or ask leading questions. We don't care about metaphors in wartime. War is a poor ferry.[2] Its very nature is destructive. It can't do what metaphors do best: by making the familiar strange again and the strange familiar, they open us up to new connections. Metaphors generate possibilities. War breaks those down.

There are better ferries if we are going to re-knit our common life.

EARLY NATIONAL STORIES

Nearly twenty years ago, I found myself in the National Library of Scotland reading about how much pork Scottish emigrants would bring with them on the journey to America. These guides to emigration were composed by successful emigrants, failed emigrants (who became self-styled 'travelers' or back-migrants) and sojourners in America. The emigrant is at the fulcrum of the pressures from both sides of the Atlantic: to either be a new convert to the land of plenty across the sea or to bemoan the lack of civilization amongst the Americans. These emigrant guides show us how one might create a personal and communal identity outside of local and national stability.

At a long table reading the books retrieved by a mechanism from underground vaults, I would sit hunched over these eighteenth century guides, in which Scottish men detailed the merits of a particular place in which to settle, listed provisions to take, and what time of the year to leave Scotland for America. Emigrant guides resist easy generic classification: a British reviewer called it "a vast mass of anecdotes, facts, declamations, pictures, quotations from noteworthy works…are thrown together by a sort of manual exertion…and then advertised for sale."[3] Many went through several editions and some were reviewed in prominent journals. Meant to be read by family and friends back home, and usually for a wider audience through publication, the guides walk the line between personal messages sent back home to pamphlets of propaganda.

But I wanted to know: when on the ocean journey did these emigrant writers begin to reckon with what it might mean to leave one's homeland and go to another? When did they begin asking questions about what it might mean to be American? Would they, like the Puritans before them, have this sense in which traveling the Atlantic was like a baptism, an entrance into a new world? And, personally, what did these immigrants have to teach me about being in a place or being out of place? What, I wondered, are the threads that make up an identity, perhaps especially a national one?

Largely, they didn't have an answer for these existential questions of identity — at least not outright. (They did, after all, focus on instructing would-be emigrants about clothing, food, and where to settle). But they did hold a curious generic position: one that complicated some of the seamless stories we use when we talk about

[2] See this helpful overview of war language as metaphor and as policy in TIME: Paul M. Renfro, "War has been the Governing Metaphor for Decades of American Life. This Pandemic Exposes its Weakness," TIME, April 15, 2020, https://time.com/5821430/history-war-language/

[3] Anonymous, rev. of *Stranger in America* by Janson, Edinburgh Review (1807): 103-116. 103.

the meaning of America. The Scottish emigrant writer couldn't unequivocally progress from Scot to American with an Atlantic crossing. He (and it was largely a "he") had to make his experience accessible to his countrymen on both sides of the Atlantic, dually positioning himself and serving as a sort of translator between national experiences.

As some of independent America's first storytellers, eighteenth-century emigrant writers create an imaginative world based on their real-world experience of America but one that tenuously bridges the gap. Emigrants are in the American world, but not yet of it. Yet, they are also more of America than their readers.

As these authors engage with other emigrant-authors and critique other guides within their own, increasing focus on the emigrant leads to a surfacing of fears about emigration itself. The promotional ends of the guides mean that literal fears of the ocean crossing and overland journey as well as larger fears about identity formation and finding a community, continue to resurface throughout the guide, even as the authors focus on practical concerns. National identity is a tenuous construction.

THE EMIGRANT FERRY

The story Americans might tell of our nation's beginning as a land of opportunity and a land of plenty was and has always been complicated by actual emigrant experience. Emigration (especially from Britain in the 18th century), while it may have often been one-way, was portrayed as a rite of passage, a "crossing over," and frequently borrowed language around Christian conversion and baptism. But the on-the-ground emigrant experience (even as it was filtered through a promotional literary form) complicates such a seamless notion of national identity. Westward migration where social structures must be created and a desolate, untamed wilderness effectively cut off a European emigrant from his point of origin. Without long-standing relational networks, the emigrant is poised for transformation — and in early American literature (both in the guides and fiction), it isn't always clear in which direction these characters will be transformed.

`

Likely the first text to grapple with and imagine what it means to be American in fictional form is J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* published in 1782. Crèvecoeur himself, like emigrant guide authors, straddles national and cultural borders. *Letters* was published not in the author's native French, but in English, and published not in America, but in England. The author was known by both English and French names, and "transformed from a French lieutenant during the French and Indian War, to a loyalist British subject and farmer in rural New York in the 1770s, to a British prisoner, and to a French trade consul to the United States in 1784."[4] While the book's naively optimistic third letter, "What is an American?" is often anthologized, the book's narration and genre shift and change throughout, so that by the end of the book, Farmer James finds himself adrift generically, politically, and existentially. This is no uncomplicated love song to American ideals, but a tonal and generically shifting wrestling with

[4] Susan Manning, ed., "Introduction," *Letters from an American Farmer*, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (Oxford: OUP, 1997), vii. Subsequent quotes from Letters are from this edition.

what it means to be an American.

In that optimistic third letter, the fictional Farmer James describes this new man of America: "He is an American, who leaving behind him all his antient [sic] prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds…Here are individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men…". How does one become American? Using metaphors from the soil or from religious experience, Farmer James writes of emigrants as "transplanted" to America, they are "western pilgrims" "melted into a new race of men". James notes how this "new man" is sprung from nothing and the ideal of the American farmer is born: "The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new options…he is rewarded by ample subsistence".

The worrying aspects of what it costs to become "this new man" grow as the text progresses. *Letters* provides a generic model that holds in tension an Enlightenment model of progress and shows its shadow side of disintegration as it progresses from confident, first-person documentary forms to a slide into a pseudo-Gothic mode. In other words, the form of Letters evidences the precarious project of what it means to be American, especially in the early years of the Republic. Form as well as content shift. The crux is Letter 9 when Farmer James sees a slave in a cage in Charles-Town, tortured for killing a slave master: "I shudder when I recollect that the birds had already picked out his eyes; his cheek bones were bare; his arms had been attacked in several places, and his body seemed covered with a multitude of wounds." The horror continues: "The living spectre, though deprived of his eyes, could still distinctly hear". James offers the dying man a drink of water and walks away, stunned, horrified, and listens to arguments about the "necessity" of this sort of punishment. The letter ends. In a further letter, he finds a bit of hope in a cosmopolitan scientific community, but ultimately, James is left to narrate an increasingly evil world — one where his framework for understanding his place in the world grows increasingly untenable.

The evils of slavery and the coming horrors of war weaken Farmer James' narration and grip on what he'd thought America was. Losing confidence in the national project, in human goodness, and in God, in his final letter, "Distresses of a Frontier Man," he writes: "Why has the Master of the world permitted so much indiscriminate evil throughout every part of the poor planet, at all times, and among all kinds of people?" He concludes by leaving civilized society, unable to choose a side in the coming American Revolution because it, too, is fraught with evils like slavery; more than that, all of society seems futile: "but life appears to be a mere accident, and of the worst kind: we are born to be victims so diseases and passions, of mischances and death: better not to be than to be miserable — Thus impiously I roam, I fly from one errant thought to another". His narration breaks down, taking a Gothic turn.

Letters from an American Farmer gives America "its first moral geography"[5]: where a character's location signals and affects his or her status

[5] Stephen Fender, *Sea Changes: British Emigration and American Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992) 12.

and existential condition. Farmer James is the first protagonist to "light out for the territory" like Huck Finn, to move westward and to a frontier when perceived or real evil becomes too much. He will be followed by pioneers like the fictional Natty Bumpo, Gold Rush prospectors, immigrants, those searching for fame in sunny Hollywood, and for those for whom space becomes the "final frontier" in the 20th century. *Letters*, then, is "at once a celebration of America, and its tragedy;" the book is an origin story of what America is, could be, and the costs of becoming "this new man."

What are the metaphors we'll use to speak about America? Is America the "land of the free"? Farmer James reminds us that we have a choice in how we tell our national stories: we can choose the unfettered narrative of bucolic scenes, that America is a land of plenty available to all, and push the evils of slavery under the rug. We can elide the experience of those like past or present immigrants as not really "American," unless they are melted into a new race of men. Or, we can choose to hold together both the blessings of a nation and its evils. As Christian people, we have resources at our disposal to hold these two in tension. We have the grace of repentance for our sins of omission and commission, even for the sins of structures and institutions that, though we may not have been personally responsible for, we have borne their effects. But is leaving the only way? While we may not have a physical landscape to run to in order to start anew, we do have ways to temporally begin again. We can take a clear look at the stories we tell ourselves about national identity, how even our own early American literature complicates and questions what it means to be American, and we can look for ways to repent. This is how we might begin again.

Imaginative work like emigrant guides and early American fiction remind us that the stories America has told about itself are never as uncomplicated as we sometimes believe them to be. It is intellectually and spiritually lazy of us to tell ourselves stories about the nation that elide its evils. The form and content of our earliest national stories show the challenges of becoming American, perhaps because America more than any other country, was built upon an idea. American Christians, like those in-between figures like emigrant writers and Farmer James, hold to multiple identities too, being in the world but not of it. For Christians, our ultimate allegiance isn't to a nation or constitution, but to the King of Kings. While we endeavor to be faithful citizens, rooted in our places and serving in our local communities and churches, it is as we hold hybrid identities and as we clearly state the progress, pitfalls, and sins of both ourselves and our nation, that we'll offer metaphors to embrace the complexities of what it means to belong to a nation.

ASHLEY HALES HOLDS A PHD IN ENGLISH FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND. SHE'S A WRITER, SPEAKER, AND HOSTS THE FINDING HOLY PODCAST. ASHLEY'S MARRIED TO A PASTOR AND THE MOTHER TO 4. HER WRITING HAS BEEN FEATURED IN SUCH PLACES AS THE GOSPEL COALITION, BOOKS & CULTURE, AND CHRISTIANITY TODAY AND SHE LOVES SPEAKING AROUND THE US. SHE IS THE AUTHOR OF FINDING HOLY IN THE SUBURBS AND A SPACIOUS LIFE . CONNECT WITH ASHLEY AT AAHALES.COM OR ON INSTAGRAM AND TWITTER AT @AAHALES.

Hobbits and Empire:
GEOGRAPHY AND THE LIFE OF NATIONS IN TOLKIEN'S WRITINGS

HOLLY ORDWAY

As we journey through J.R.R. Tolkien's world of Middle-earth, we find a remarkable variety of distinctive landscapes, from the rural towns of the Shire, to the abandoned halls of Moria, the Elvish tree-city of Lothlórien, the Forest of Drúadan, the grasslands of Rohan, the stone city of Minas Tirith in Gondor, and many more. *The Lord of the Rings* gives us more than just the setting: in these places, we encounter people with their own languages and histories, in communities that are organically rooted in their fictional ground.

Fictional, and yet with intriguing connections to our own world: as Tolkien pointed out, in Middle-earth he had "constructed an imaginary time, but kept my feet on my own mother-earth for place."[1] The Shire, Tolkien explained, was "based on rural England"[2]; and Tom Bombadil is "the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside."[3] In annotations to a map of Middle-earth, Tolkien noted that Hobbiton was at the same latitude as Oxford.[4] We can even picture Tolkien as a dweller in the Shire, for he described himself as "a Hobbit (in all but size)" who likes "gardens, trees and unmechanized farmlands."[5]

The fictional world (with its real-world inspirations) was also, in its inspiration, connected to Tolkien's sense of himself as an Englishman. He wrote that his ambition for his legendarium, the great body of work

[1] J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981. 283.

[2] *Letters* 250.

[3] *Letters* 26.

[4] *J.R.R. Tolkien, annotations on a map by Pauline Baynes, Tolkien: Voyage en Terre du Milieu, ed. Christian Bourgois, 72–73.*

[5] *Letters* 288.

that includes *The Lord of the Rings, The Hobbit*, and *The Silmarillion,* had been "to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story . . . which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country."[6] Love of his country is an element of his imaginative vision.

It is this connection that I wish to explore — necessarily briefly, for the subject is a large one. Tolkien invented a wide range of what we might imprecisely be tempted to call 'nations' for Middle-earth, with one of them, the Shire, profoundly connected to his own home. How did geography and nationality, place and patriotism, relate in Tolkien's thought?

Tolkien's associations with England and its countryside are deep and readily apparent — but as a Catholic, he was also on the margins of English culture. England in Tolkien's childhood and early adulthood was a country that was still only uneasily tolerant of the Catholic Church. Though legally most discrimination against Catholics was over by the 20th century, the after-effects of the Elizabethan Religious Settlement (1558-59) and the so-called "Glorious Revolution" (1688-89) could still be felt and certain barriers between Catholics and British society at large remained in place. In a number of respects, indeed, that continues to be true to this day. At Oxford all the formerly Catholic college chapels (including two of Tolkien's colleges, Exeter and Merton) remain Anglican, and the monarch is still constitutionally barred from being a Catholic, although in 2013 the Succession to the Crown Act did permit heirs to the British throne to marry a Catholic.

As Virginia Luling points out, Tolkien's religion was "the embattled faith of a minority with memories of persecution" and not, as in other countries, "synonymous with power and establishment"; the land he loved "was not the England that became a commercial Empire, not a conquering but a conquered nation."[7] Tolkien's own self-perception was that of someone belonging to a group that had been, and in some respects still was, disenfranchised and marginalized. It is therefore perhaps to be expected that Tolkien also took a firm stand against anti-Semitic sentiment at a time when it was all too common.[8]

Tolkien's sense of patriotism was essentially local and anti-imperial, though he was born at the height of England's global Empire. Writing to his friend Christopher Wiseman in 1914, Tolkien said that although he believed in the "duty of patriotism," he could no longer defend the Boer War and was "a more & more convinced Home Ruler." Interestingly, he added, "I don't defend 'Deutschland über alles' but certainly do the Norwegian 'alt for Norge' which translates itself."[9] Love for country meant love and self-sacrifice for one's own native land, without trying to dominate others: patriotism, not nationalism.

His dislike of totalitarianism and imperialism (both ancient and modern) appears in various places in his work, including a 1944 letter to his son Christopher, where he wrote, "I should

[6] *Letters* 144.

[7] Virginia Luling, "An Anthropologist in Middle-earth." *Mythlore* 80, vol. 21, no. 2 (Winter 1996). 53.

[8] See *Letters* 37–38 and 410n.

[9] Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond, *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide: Reader's Guide.* Revised and expanded edition. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2017) 1399.

have hated the Roman Empire in its day (as I do), and remained a patriotic Roman citizen, while preferring a free Gaul and seeing good in Carthaginians."[10] The chronological context of this remark is interesting, coming as it does toward the end of the Second World War. For Tolkien, the Romans seem to have been symbolic (at least in part) of the totalitarian and machine culture that he so consistently opposed: the archetypal imperial power that is determined to impose its will both on nature and on other nations.

As a historically educated man and a Catholic to boot, Tolkien would, of course, have been well aware that many important elements of civilization came from the Romans — and indeed he would later thoroughly enjoy, with his daughter Priscilla, a trip to Italy. He was willing to recognize a similarity between Aragorn's coronation in Minas Tirith and "the re-establishment of an effective Holy Roman Empire with its seat in Rome"[11] — though it is worth pointing out, for the avoidance of confusion, that this comparison is to a medieval re-envisioning of the Roman Empire made "Holy" by the Christianizing of Europe, not to the ancient, pagan version that preceded the conversion of Constantine. But Tolkien had also seen first-hand, in both World Wars, that horrifically destructive wars could be instigated by nations that boasted a high degree of 'civilization.' Indeed, it is worth observing that Saruman, who seems the wisest and most learned of the wizards and is the head of their Council, is the one who is most tragically corrupted by the lust for power.

It is notable as well that in *The Lord of the Rings*, Boromir's desire to possess the Ring for the defense of his homeland of Gondor, though rooted in good intentions, betokens an unhealthily nationalist outlook derived from his father. Denethor states the priorities of his political philosophy baldly when he declares "there is no purpose higher in the world as it now stands than the good of Gondor" — as clear an example of the absolutization of national interest as one could hope to find, and it comes from a character who is shown to be self-centered, mistrustful, and oblivious to the welfare of his own family, let alone the people under his rule.

We can see another instance of Tolkien's rejection of imperialism and colonialism in his depiction of Ghân-buri-Ghân and his people, the Wild Men who, at a crucial moment, lead Théoden's forces through their woods to enable them to help break the siege of Gondor. Tolkien's description highlights their strangeness: Ghân-buri-Ghân is "a strange squat shape of a man, gnarled as an old stone, and the hairs of his scanty beard straggled on his lumpy chin like dry moss. He was short-legged and fat-armed, thick and stumpy, and clad only with grass about his waist." One possible critique of the scene is that they are stereotypical aborigines, but this works to Tolkien's purposes. In appearance, they are exactly the kind of people who are cruelly exploited, ignored, dismissed with condescension, or treated with irony in so many of the adventure novels of that era. However, in *The Lord of the Rings*, the scene is presented with restraint and without disrespect.

[10] *Letters,* 89.

[11] *Letters,* 376.

Furthermore, Tolkien includes several nods toward the problems of race relations. In the initial discussion, when Éomer condescendingly questions how he can know the number and location of the orcs as he claims, Ghân-buri-Ghân retorts, "Wild Men are wild, free, but not children. . . . I count many things: stars in sky, leaves on trees, men in the dark." Théoden then sides with the Wild Man, over and against Éomer's doubts, saying that Ghân-buri-Ghân speaks "shrewdly," and accepting his offer of assistance. Here we see Tolkien presenting a scene in which Éomer's potentially racist assumptions about the Wild Man's intelligence — perhaps based on his imperfect command of the Common Tongue — are confronted and rebuked; and we learn shortly thereafter that Ghân-buri-Ghân's assessment of the tactical situation is indeed correct.

We see that the Rohirrim learn to trust the Wild Men, despite their evident differences: "to no heart in all the host came any fear that the Wild Men were unfaithful, strange and unlovely though they might appear." But Tolkien does not allow the reader naively to mistake this moment of racial harmony for true reconciliation. After Théoden accepts the help of the Wild Men, Ghân-buri-Ghân makes a request in turn: rather than accepting the offered riches as a reward, he requests that the men of Rohan leave the Wild Men alone and "not hunt them like beasts any more"; Théoden replies, "So be it!" Both of these remarks are significant. First, Tolkien shows us that the warriors of Rohan, whom we have come to admire, have in the past unjustly treated the peaceable Wild Men like animals. Théoden admits this: he does not argue with Ghân-buri-Ghân about the accuracy of this claim, but simply and directly agrees to change his people's ways.

Second, and significantly, Tolkien returns to this point later, reinforcing it. At the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, Aragorn proceeds with his company to the forest of Drúadan, where he has his heralds proclaim: "Behold, the King Elessar is come! The Forest of Drúadan he gives to Ghân-buri-Ghân and to his folk, to be their own for ever; and hereafter let no man enter it without their leave!" The observers hear the drums of the Wild Men acknowledging this announcement. Aragorn as High King thus both ratifies Théoden's agreement and extends it: not only will the Wild Men be left in peace, as they requested, but their sovereignty is recognized. One of the first actions of the true King, then, is to give away some of his power; we get a glimpse of the way that this kingship does not operate in terms of the usual worldly goals of an Empire. We see in Appendix B of *The Lord of the Rings* that Aragorn would later also make the Shire a "Free Land under the protection of the Northern Sceptre," a land for hobbits where humans are not to enter, thus emphasizing the way that his kingship is intended for the protection and flourishing, not the control and exploitation, of his subjects.

If we see, then, that Tolkien's view of nations is essentially anti-imperial, what was the positive form of his patriotism?

The connection to one's native land was, for Tolkien, fundamentally geographical, veritably rooted in one's home turf. C.S. Lewis recalled that "Tolkien once remarked to me that the feeling about home must have been quite different in the days when a family had fed on the produce of the same few miles of country for six generations. . . . there was in a sense a real (not metaphorical) connection between them and the country-side. What had been earth and air & later corn, and later still bread, really was in them." In the modern day, however, consuming foods sourced from all over the world, we "have no connection (save in sentiment) with any place on earth. We

are synthetic men, uprooted. The strength of the hills is not ours."[12] For Tolkien, the rootedness of a people in a certain place had little to do with racial inheritance, or with political ideology, and more to do with their relationship to the land and its fruits.

In explaining the nature of his early ambition to create a mythology he could dedicate to his country, Tolkien explained that he intended that the "tone and quality" of this body of stories "be redolent of our 'air' (the clime and soil of the North West, meaning Britain and the hither parts of Europe: not Italy or the Aegean, still less the East)."[13] Tolkien admits this ambition almost with embarrassment, calling it "absurd," but this is, I suspect, at least partly genuine humility and partly his (very English) aversion to anything that hints at earnestness and self-praise, for it is not an impossible idea, even if very difficult to achieve.

Tolkien's view that there is such a thing as a *genius loci* is characteristically nuanced, and held in a productive balance with his understanding of individual moral agency. Insofar as landscape and climate have an influence on culture and character, it is in a dynamic rather than a determinative way. He observes that the best way to understand the relationship; between innate personality and outward change in a person is by comparison to "a seed with its innate vitality and heredity, its capacity to grow and develop." Some of the changes we may observe in a person are "unfoldings of the patterns hidden in the seed" which can be "modified by the situation (geographical or climatic) into which it is thrown." So far, we have a sense of the relationship of personality and place. Then he explains further:

> But this comparison leaves out inevitably an important point. A man is not only a seed, developing in a defined pattern, well or ill according to its situation or its defects as an example of its species; a man is both a seed and in some degree also a gardener, for good or ill. I am impressed by the degree in which the development of 'character' can be a product of conscious intention, the will to modify innate tendencies in desired directions; in some cases the change can be great and permanent.[14]

In The Lord of the Rings, we see how Frodo gives himself entirely to the Quest, making a complete self-sacrifice to destroy the One Ring. Tolkien explains that Frodo's actions are not best described in political terms, but rather in 'humane' terms, that is, with regard to relating to others (whether these are humans, Elves, hobbits, and so on). Frodo, he says,

> naturally thought first of the Shire, since his roots were there, but the quest had as its object not the preserving of this or that polity, such as the half republic half aristocracy of the Shire, but the liberation from an evil tyranny of all the 'humane'– including those, such as 'easterlings' and Haradrim, that were still servants of the tyranny.[15]

Frodo, though rooted in the Shire, could and did choose to act for the good not just of his own home, but of all the communities of Middle-earth.

[12] C.S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume I*. Edited by Walter Hooper. (New York: HarperCollins, 2000) 909.

[13] *Letters,* 144.

[14] *Letters,* 240.

[15] *Letters,* 240-241.

Though Tolkien's own sense of place was grounded in Britain and northwest Europe, his vision of the 'humane' is expansive, and indeed deeply Christian: the Quest is to destroy Sauron's regime, for the benefit of all peoples, everywhere in Middle-earth, even those who are still fighting for Sauron. Indeed, it is notable that in *The Lord of the Rings*, the first official judgments that Aragorn makes after his coronation as King are centered on reconciliation: he "pardoned the Easterlings that had given themselves up, and sent them away free, and he made peace with the peoples of Harad; and the slaves of Mordor he released and gave to them all the lands about Lake Núrnen to be their own." Although these places and peoples are not the focus of the particular story he is telling, we see that they have not been overlooked; they have a value and importance in their own right. Tolkien wrote of his ambition that "other minds and hands"[16] would in time contribute to his mythology; perhaps here we see a gesture toward those tales that others might someday tell, filling in the blank spaces in the vast canvas of Middle-earth's legendarium.

In his views on nations, nationalism, and patriotism, Tolkien shared the perspective of another deeply humane and learned man, his fellow lexicographer, Dr. Samuel Johnson.[17] Tolkien's fellow Inkling John Wain wrote, in his biography of Samuel Johnson, that Johnson and his friends at 'The Club' were "patriotic"

in the sense that they wished their country well and were glad to be thought well of by it. Which is not to say that they were infected with the evil nationalism that sees its own nation as a mechanism for seizing power and wishes to see it go on and on, blindly seizing more and more power until the day comes of the inevitable conflict with some rival expression of a collective will. Johnson, conspicuously, was free of jingo patriotism, being anti-expansionist and anti-imperialist. In wishing his country well, he primarily wished it to be a civilized place where people could be happy.[18]

This essay is adapted in part from *Tolkien's Modern Reading: Middle-earth Beyond the Middle Ages* (Word on Fire Academic, 2021).

HOLLY ORDWAY IS THE FELLOW OF FAITH & CULTURE OF THE WORD ON FIRE INSTITUTE. SHE IS A VISITING PROFESSOR AT HOUSTON BAPTIST UNIVERSITY AND HOLDS A PHD IN ENGLISH FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST.

[16] *Letters,* 145.

[17] Tolkien, of course, knew the writings of Johnson. They formed part of his undergraduate studies, as we see in his lecture notes (Bodleian MS. Tolkien A 21/4), they were discussed at Inklings gatherings, and of course the author of the famous *Dictionary* would have been a significant figure for Tolkien and his colleagues in their work on the New English Dictionary (which became the Oxford English Dictionary).

[18] John Wain, *Samuel Johnson* (London: Macmillan, 1974) 236.

Learning to See with Norman Wirzba

LAURA CERBUS

Soon after we moved to Australia, my family hiked in a temperate rainforest in the Yarra Ranges, an hour-and-a-half from our house. Southern Victoria is home to several of these rainforests. They challenge my prior knowledge of rainforests as places where the hot air drips with humidity, and where creatures such as toucans, monkeys, and boa constrictors live. In contrast to the bright colors and raucous noises of my imagination, the rainforests of my experience are subdued, quiet. In comparison, unimpressive.

An observation platform marked the beginning of this rainforest walking path. Sitting fifty feet above the ground, the platform extended into the canopy. Even though we were close to the summit, no panoramic views met us: We were surrounded by dense, damp forest. Mountain ash and myrtle birch trees formed the pillars of the leafy canopy. One tree, to the left of the platform, had shed most of its bark for the season, revealing a smooth, paneled trunk with ochre, bronze, and taupe patches streaked through the tan-colored wood. It dwarfed its neighbors in width. Its presence shouted in an otherwise quiet space; the other trees stood demurely, bark intact, covered with moss and ferns.

I was, I confess, disappointed. We had sought the location because Google Maps had marked it as a place of interest, and the posted reviews were positive. I know that I expected more from it than it gave. I had desired a particular emotional thrill, which I thought was promised by an observation platform at the top of a mountain. And having narrowly defined beauty to the spectacular and exotic, I was unable to recognize it in that rainforest.

That day in the rainforest, I saw the world as Eve did: I desired and I took, grasping for myself rather than receiving what was given by God. Although my response stands in contrast to the more obvious and egregious forms of abuse of the creation — dumping toxic waste in waterways, replacing productive land with strip mines, destroying forests — it nonetheless positioned me over and against creation, rather than with and for it. I had come to see something new, purely for my own pleasure.

IDOLATROUS GAZE

Norman Wirzba identifies this perception, which sees only what is, or isn't, pleasurable to us, as idolatry. "All too often," he argues in *From Nature to Creation*, "we deny the radical otherness or alterity of others," a move which "reduces the integrity of others to the level of what we want or expect." This move is idolatrous because it fails to receive God's creation as a gift, something determined not by our own desires or needs but by their creator. The idolatrous gaze looks at the world as "an extension or fulfilment of our want and need." Rather than being opened to the world outside of ourselves, idolatry closes us in on ourselves.

Our idolatrous gaze flattens our perception of creation. Instead of posturing ourselves as recipients of a divine gift, we instead take the role of critic and consumer. Our travels, hikes, and explorations become photo opportunities and quests to find the perfect spot. We seek the thrill and excitement of the exotic and spectacular. We want to be able to claim firsthand experience of the places that count — the places that have been deemed beautiful by national parks programs or viral social media posts. Creation can become a means to build our own status or brand. When we encounter creation like this, although it offers itself to us as a sign of divine presence, our eyes are not open.

A similar posture towards the land marks the history of European colonization, both in my native country of the United States and my current home of Australia. Speaking of American colonization, Wirzba follows Willie James Jennings in writing of the European invaders' perception of the Americas as potentialities, land that was ripe for change and development. Rather than perceive the land as God's gift to be received and cared for, many early settlers saw the land as "virgin territory and raw material waiting to be turned into a possession that could then be modified to enrich its holders." The land mattered only as much as it could be useful.

The Australian story is similar, although given the significant difference in climate from Europe to Australia, the effects on the land have been arguably worse. The British convicts and military personnel arriving in 1788 considered themselves to be settlers, not invaders, based on their judgment that the land they arrived in was unoccupied and uncultivated ("terra nullius"). Their first task, after erecting basic shelters, was to clear and cultivate the land — despite their unfamiliarity with the landscape and climate. Their ignorance brought them to near starvation. Second and third waves of settlers included skilled farmers, men and women who were experienced in cold-climate agriculture and landscapes. However, instead of receiving the land as a gift, they sought to shape it in the image of Europe, clearing the land and introducing foreign animals and plants, and forgoing the fire management practices of the Aboriginal people. Their changes have had devastating effects on the Australian landscape, as biodiversity loss, dryland salinity, disastrous bushfires and other land issues threaten Australia's ecology. Whether through greed or ignorance, or both, the colonists' view of Australia reduced it to their own desires and needs, rather than perceiving the land in its integrity as a creation and gift of God.

ICONIC PERCEPTION

What might we see if we would rightly perceive creation? Taking his cue from the Christ hymn of Colossians, Wirzba argues that "the character and significance of the world become intelligible through the life of Jesus of Nazareth." By Christ the eternal *Logos*, the whole world is held together in loving harmony, "leading [each thing] into the goodness and beauty of its own life but also of its life with others." For Wirzba, "God is love" is not a trite expression. Instead, God's love fundamentally grounds his relationship to the creation: "Whatever is, is only because it already participates in the divine love that brings it into being, daily sustains it, and ultimately leads it to fulfillment in union with God. Creation is the good and beautiful place in which God's love is forever at work."

Perceived in this way, the flora, fauna, and landscapes that we perceive are transfigured. Wirzba proposes an iconic mode of perception, one which opens a person to the depths of what she perceives. The foundation of this perception is love: a love that "does not pretend to comprehend, nor does it mean to take the other as a possession or object of control." This love responds to God's own love for the world, demonstrated by his delighted assessment that "it was very good." Love recognizes the integrity of creation, not as an object for our consumption but as an objective reality that is loved and constituted apart from our use of it. This approach perceives each created thing as an invitation to look deeper, to have our gaze drawn beyond its surface features to the "excess of meaning and significance that is inspired and nourished by an infinite God who calls it into being." As Ramandu admonishes Eustace in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, gas may be what a star is made of, but it is not what a star *is*.

Our scientific naming and mapping, while capable of recognizing the order of the world, cannot be the only means by which we receive what God has made. Foundationally, we receive as God has given: in love. Love, Wirzba argues, "is the crucial and most authentic movement of seeing" because "love is the welcoming and hospitable gesture that makes oneself available to others, sets them free to be themselves, and nourishes them in the ways of life." Love is an other-oriented posture that unseats us. It moves us out of a position of critique and consumption and instead allows us to give ourselves to the other in a "commitment to engage the other *as other*, rather than as the object of our own desires." When we perceive the creation in this way, we open our hands to receive its inexhaustible depth as a sign of the presence and beauty of God.

THANKSGIVING

How might we learn to perceive the creation rightly? Wirzba argues that we need to reorient our relationship to the world, and explores thanksgiving as a means to this. Giving thanks is the appropriate response upon receiving a gift, and giving thanks for creation shows that we have understood it to be a divine gift. What Wirzba has in mind is not the trite, obligatory response that we are trained to give as children, but an action that leads us "into a transformed understanding of the world as the place of encounter with God's love" and "restores to people their role as eucharistic beings and as priests of creation." This kind of thanksgiving cannot keep the world at arm's length, but declares our bonds, both to God and to the creation. To receive creation as a gift and express our gratitude for it precludes any sense that we can exert our desires and will over it, because we recognize its integrity: its existence before God as good, apart from our own need for it.

Benedict XVI stresses the world as a divine gift in his 2010 World Day of Peace address. He insists

that "The environment must be seen as God's gift to all people," and that "nature is a gift of the Creator." God gives the world as a gift, and yet because the world continues to be upheld and sustained by him, the world continues to be his. To receive the world, a world in which we are also creatures, we must know and love the giver. He has revealed himself to be good, gracious, and beautiful — a God who gives out of his overflowing triune love. His character defines and shapes our own relationship with the creation. When we receive the world and turn towards God in thanksgiving, we express the truth that the source of the world is not human, but divine. Giving thanks in this way will also include confession and petition. Wirzba argues, "Insofar as we lack the appropriate attention and humility, and thereby do injury to the integrity of others, confession and asking for forgiveness will be abiding elements in any expression of gratitude we offer…there is no giving of thanks that is not at the same time a request for forgiveness and a petition to be instructed in the ways of love." Offering thanks in this way puts us in a place of humility, as we recognize our obligations, and the ways in which we have not received the gift of creation well. When we confess our idolatrous gaze, we clear the ground for transformation to take place.

On that hike through the Yarra Ranges, the rainforest we explored offered me an opportunity — one which I neglected. Confronted with a landscape outside of my experience and expectations, I had the opportunity to expand my comprehension of the word 'rainforest.' I had the opportunity to pay attention, to have my imagination opened to the breadth and depth of what a rainforest can be, and the diverse forms of the beauty with which God has adorned his creation. I had the opportunity to receive, and to turn to the Creator to give thanks. Instead, I went there with only my desires in view. Thus, my disappointment was inevitable because I did not have eyes to see.

My failure is not only mine, but shared by a culture obsessed with the self. Even among those who assert that creation is the good gift of God, our desires, shaped by sin and culture, are difficult to change. Our attention is difficult to retrain. Our natural habits of selfishness and inattention, combined with the modern tendency towards control and consumption, require a committed effort to retrain our perception. But when we do succeed, however haltingly, we open ourselves to God's love, abundantly poured out into the world.

ORIGINALLY FROM WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA, LAURA CERBUS LIVES AND TEACHES IN MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA ON THE LAND OF THE BOONWURRUNG PEOPLE. SHE IS A DOCTORAL STUDENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DIVINITY, WHERE SHE IS RESEARCHING BEAUTY AND CREATION CARE, AND SHE WRITES AT LAURACERBUS.COM

When Belief is Agony:

SCRUPULOSITY, APOSTASY, AND HOW TO STRATEGICALLY DISTRUST YOUR OWN MIND

SUSANNAH BLACK

I love being a Christian.

I mean, I love Jesus *too*. But I also love all the rest of it: Brunch after church with friends, hylomorphism, late-night Eucharist on Christmas Eve, and carols and stollen and roast beef and friends' children whom I have known and loved since they were born, dressed in deeply miscellaneous animal and animal-adjacent costumes for the pageant. C.S. Lewis and John Donne and Charles De Koninck, Durham Cathedral and St. Cuthbert's tomb, tucked away absentmindedly behind the high altar, the Aksum Empire and the Holy Roman Empire and all the little communes of monks and anabaptists, who read Acts 2 and 4 and decided to just go ahead and do it; stoles and copes and incense and candles; neoplatonism and canon law and postliberalism and hot cross buns.

And knowing that I am called to a high calling, that nothing good will be lost, that there are no ordinary people, that death has been killed, that our God and King has given us his body to eat, his blood to drink. I love it. I love the experience of being a Christian, and I also think it's true, so there's that.

But there have been times when I have found belief to be almost unbearable. And I've met enough other people who have shared this particular difficulty that I think my story might be worth writing down.

I was sixteen when I was baptized, but it wasn't until grad school that I started more seriously to try to follow Jesus. In the decade after that grad school conversion, I went through various ... well, in retrospect I'd call them attacks, or something. Episodes. Times I couldn't stop thinking. I would call them, now, ruminations, though I didn't have that language then. They came in three varieties:

First, an inability to stop thinking about the idea that God might not be good, might not be trustworthy, if Calvinism was right. Second, a sense of "I can't live in a world where some people may be going to hell."

Third, I also at various points felt intensely guilty about things which an objective observer would not say that I ought to feel guilty about. Can I spend time doing anything other than evangelism, or serving the poor? Does God want me to enjoy nature and read novels, or are these things worldly, of the flesh? How can I enjoy *anything* while abortion is an ongoing reality in this world, in my country?

These circling thoughts led to a kind of exhaustion about my own attempts to make sense of everything, and a sort of grief, a nostalgia for a time when I was just a secular person, not needing to worry about any of this stuff. I felt alienated from non-Christians and even from Christians who didn't share my intensity and anguish.

And maybe a couple of times, at the worst of these moments, I felt like I was presented with a choice: you can cease to believe, or you can pray for faith. And I prayed for faith.

That choice didn't feel like it would change reality. What it felt like was that I was given the option to become … a non-player character, somehow. Taking the blue pill, and so on: living in the psychological comfort apostasy offered.

Scrupulosity is agonizing. I had the worried-I-was-sinning kind, too, though usually I worried I was sinning by omission. But the ruminations: those are a real bear.

I'm not sure when I first heard that word — scrupulosity. I think at some point I probably googled "religious OCD," which is more or less what it is, and what I could feel that it was. It's been a weird blessing in my life that before my adult conversion, I'd experienced what might be called secular OCD: obsessive-compulsive disorder unrelated to Christianity. How OCD works is that it makes what feel like moral threats: your moral safety, or physical safety, is at risk; you are both unsafe and in the wrong, and performing various rituals (handwashing, not stepping on cracks: the disorder is varied in what it comes up with but it does seem to come up with the same things frequently) is what will put you morally and physically right again.

Very frequently what you care about most is what the disorder "chooses" to threaten you about: "wash your hands just right or your child will die and it will be your fault," that kind of thing. Those with this disorder are not delusional: You always know on some level that the threat isn't real, it's irrational, and because of that, the disorder can be profoundly embarrassing. "Don't mind me, just going to ummm… wash my hands seven times and then turn off the tap with the backs of my hands… for… reasons… you go ahead and start dinner."

It started when I was around twelve, and I got a diagnosis fairly briskly and ended up at various points doing various kinds of treatments —

medication, cognitive behavioral therapy — which all helped enormously. Because I am who I am, I also, in my teens, became deeply emotionally connected to Samuel Johnson, who had it pretty bad: he felt the need to touch each lamp-post as he passed it, walking the streets of London; he feared hell profoundly and often couldn't find peace about that. I used to imagine inventing a time machine and going back in time to bring Dr. Johnson Prozac-spiked brownies; I figured that would be less likely to cause unfortunate changing-the-timeline butterfly effects than trying to explain enough contemporary neuroscience to him to convince him to take pills. I also didn't want him to worry about what the implication of the efficacy of meds on this anxiety disorder was for the existence of the soul — he had enough religious ruminations of his own — but I worried about it. (I also, full disclosure, had a pretty intense crush on him).

The solution to *that* (the worry about the implication of the efficacy of the meds on the existence of the soul, not the crush) at least was to get better theology. If wine can make your heart merry, or doing shots of Jägermeister can disastrously lower your inhibitions, it's not a problem in theological anthropology that a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) can dial down the anxiety enough to let you make the choice to ignore the OCD-threat.

The way this works, as best we can tell, is that it's the repeated ignoring of those threats, that disciplined exercise of the will, that ultimately rewires those neural pathways; the meds just make the threats… quieter, the choice to ignore easier to make. That systematic building of good habits, of evaluating your own thoughts and feelings and being able to choose how to respond to them is what cognitive behavioral therapy does. You use your mind, reason, and will to physically reshape your brain.

It's not actually very different than what a Book-of-Proverbs approach to becoming better at being a human being might be. The whole package of treatment begins to look, in fact, precisely the way one would expect if we were in fact bodysouls, rather than souls inhabiting bodies, and if we were rational creatures with an immaterial intellect which can operate via the will; in other words as if human anthropology and ethics work the way St. Thomas says they do when he talks about virtue. Just to say.

So anyway, post-high school, the OCD was pretty much dealt with. And then, after college, I started going to a Vineyard church (I'm Anglican now, if you couldn't tell from all the flagrant scholasticism) and started actually spending time with people who believed that Jesus was, for real, not at all dead. And then I found that I really actually believed that too. And the stakes in life suddenly became much higher.

Conversion is always disorienting. But God gave me a time to work through the normal confusions of new Christianity: the sense that there is nothing that one can hold back, the realization that there are no guarantees that God will make ahead of time, for example, that you won't eventually need to be martyred; all the normal pricks of an awakened conscience; all the joy and amazement of the first Christmas where you find out that the carols you've been singing your whole life contain treasures which had somehow been hidden from you, lines that are suddenly alive and blazing with glory: "veiled in flesh the Godhead see/hail th'incarnate Deity/pleased as man with man to dwell/Jesus, our Emmanuel."

But within the first two years after I converted, I had my first major bout of scrupulosity.

As I've said, the feeling of OCD is one of profound danger and also of a bad conscience, in a way. It can overlap with "real conscience," but it's distinct enough, if you know it, to recognize. There was something going on here that was not just "what reality is like," "what being a sinner and having a bad conscience is like," or "what Christianity is like."

I'm an extremely curious person and I'm also a nerd, particularly when it comes to history and historical theology. What I found, after I started digging, is that scrupulosity is a known spiritual malady that pastors have been saying "oy, not this again" about for two thousand years. It's also a neurological OCD-related condition that can be treated on that basis, and confessors and spiritual directors have used cognitive behavioral therapy-like tools for most of the last two millennia to do just that.

The classical Protestant experience of scrupulosity is the lack of "assurance" of salvation which is read as evidence of a lack of election. A more contemporary Protestant experience is the fear that one hasn't "been saved" properly, that sure, you said the Sinner's Prayer but it kinda seems like maybe it didn't … take. It is not, however, the case that Catholic spirituality is without its own specific pitfalls about scrupulosity. A classical Catholic experience is the fear that you didn't remember everything you needed to confess and that therefore you are not safe in taking the Eucharist; this has kept many people away from the Mass for years.

As I mentioned above, there are two pretty distinct versions of scrupulosity. There's the one that resembles "secular" OCD and which leads sufferers to either perform repetitive prayers (not as in liturgical prayer, but as in a self-imposed "I have to say exactly these words with exactly the right emphasis and feelings for it to count") or to confess over and over again (Luther's poor confessor!) in order to "feel like they've gotten it right." And then there's the delightful experience of repetitive, racing thoughts, ruminations over theological questions, which one feels like one must resolve in order to be at peace. Neither makes for a particularly good time.

OCD has been called the "doubting disease." Did I really turn off that gas burner? Did I really lock the door? I think I did, I remember doing it… but if I did, why do I doubt so profoundly that I did, why do I feel in danger? Better check. In other words, subjective uncertainty presents itself as something to pay attention to, something that gives good information. In non-religious OCD, one learns to talk back to one's mind: "yes, I know you are subjectively uncertain, but that has nothing to do with reality."

The Puritanism which is so beloved of the New Calvinism has, as one of its signature ideas (although one might, and many have, argued that this is a distortion of the actual teaching) that a subjective assurance of salvation is a necessary mark of true salvation. This idea was carried over into some versions of the revivalism of both Great Awakenings. Anxiety becomes part of the process. One sits on the "anxious bench," until one receives assurance. Those with an unaddressed anxiety disorder can sit there for a long, long time.

Am I saved? Am I right before God? It is a question that can lead to repentance, to baptism, to a life of discipleship. It can also, in a baptized person

with every reason to trust that God's promises apply to him, now adopted into Christ's family, be the content of irrational ruminations. But so can "Can God be trusted?" and "Does God want my family to be saved?" And this can get very *very* refined indeed — as refined as your theology: "is 'good' meant equivocally or analogically when we predicate it of God? Are you sure? But are you sure? How about 'love'? Is monergism true? What can it mean that God desires all men to be saved if monergism is true? How can I trust that he wants *me* to be? Better think about this for five hours in the middle of the night to try to solve it."

I suppose most Christians have bouts of something like this at some point; we're all on something of a spectrum, with many of these kinds of mental distress. Anxious hearts are a common human malady, which God addresses; and of course some anxiety is good, some fears are real. How to distinguish between this and scrupulosity which ought to be treated as such? I can only tell my story. Probably the best thing would be to talk to your pastor; ask him if he even knows the word scrupulosity; that's a good start. Above all, do not attempt to go it alone. When your own thoughts are a trap, you need others, ideally professionals; you cannot think your way out of this.

What this looked like before the therapeutic age was that the scrupulous fled in their droves to spiritual directors. Indeed, once one starts seeing this, the whole discussion of the role of "private judgment" that was such a crucial feature of the Catholic and Protestant reformations begins to sound like it's often, at least in part, a discussion about scrupulosity.

Everyone had it. Well, not everyone. But people had it like they had Omicron in New York City over Christmas. It was just everywhere. The age of introspection that gave us Montaigne and Hamlet gave us ten thousand religious neurotics also. It's not that the Catholic vs. Protestant theological debates were really *about* scrupulosity. They were not, and I would not want anything I write here to be taken as theological indifferentism. It's that from everything I can tell, a good portion of the people who were engaged in those debates were simultaneously at least a good bit scrupulous.

"It is a secret pride," wrote St. Francis de Sales (b. 1567), "that entertains and nourishes scruples, for the scrupulous person adheres to his opinion and inquietude in spite of his director's advice to the contrary. He always persuades himself in justification of his disobedience that some new and unforeseen circumstance has occurred to which this advice cannot be applicable." As the kids say: relatable.

A Jesuit, Fr. Giovanni Pietro Pinamonti (b. 1632), writes in a manual of spiritual direction that "it is well to make the scrupulous perceive, that submitting their will to the ministers of the Lord provides them the greatest security in all that is not manifestly sin. Let them read the lives of the saints, and they will find that they know no safer road than obedience. The saints plainly trusted more to the voice of their confessor than to the immediate voice of God; and yet the scrupulous would lean more on their own judgment than on the Gospel, which assures them, He that heareth you heareth Me."

This is a different point than the point a Catholic might make about the reliability of sacred tradition through the voice of the church in an apologetic to a Protestant. It is instead a pastoral point, one that has specifically to do with how the actual Gospel, the good news of our forgiveness,

is received. The tone it should be heard in is one of ringing joy in the provision that God has given us in his church: when we hear the priests' pardon, we hear something objective and not for us to gainsay. "God's grace, his action, what he has done, is more powerful than your subjectivity." And it is, to be clear, not meant as a universal "out:" if your confessor really is corrupt, you should get a new confessor. You can't finally outsource your conscience. But you also have not been left alone. I do not think we should dismiss our attempts to hear God's voice, and I do think that it is possible to hear God's voice directly. But I also think that one must pray to be able to hear God's voice *everywhere it is*, and that directly is not the only way that it comes to us.

Luther rejected this role of confessors. But Luther also did not (always) fall into the error that, say, the second and third generation of English puritans often fell into, that of looking to one's own assurance as proof of one's rightness before God. Instead, he looked outside himself to the concrete reality of the cross, and of his own baptism.

John Bunyan (b. 1628), by contrast, had no theological or sacramental "out." He was plagued with obsessive racing thoughts about denying Christ, which he could not lay aside — not that he was tempted to deny him but that he experienced the thoughts battering at his mind, and felt the need to do exhausting mental exercises to counteract them. Even he, theologically and culturally most primed to take such subjective thoughts seriously as giving information about the state of one's soul, had the common sense of such sufferers that really, this is absurd. You know this is not real: but you can't trust that you know it. "These things may seem ridiculous to others," wrote Bunyan later, "even as ridiculous as they were in themselves, but to me they were the most tormenting cogitations; Every one of them augmented my misery."

For Bunyan, there could be no appeal to baptism, no leaning on the body of Christ: a nonconformist with little to leaven the dependence on a direct subjective experience of assurance which he was convinced was the sign of his election, he was deep into the stressed-out DIY "hotter sort of Protestantism" of the Restoration. He simply gutted it out, and God gave him, eventually, direct consolations which brought him through — just in time for him to end up in prison for twelve years for refusing to stop preaching. His time in prison was not, he thought, such a severe captivity as his time in thrall to obsessive thoughts.

In 1696, eight years after Bunyan died, Alphonsus Liguori was born. Like Bunyan, in his twenties he received a call to follow Christ with his whole heart: "Leave the world, and give yourself to me," he heard, and promptly (to his father's dismay) left his law practice to pursue ordination. Like Bunyan too, he was a popular preacher: and specifically a preacher to the people. "I have never preached a sermon which the poorest old woman in the congregation could not understand," he said, and he called many back to the faith of their baptism.

His experience and Bunyan's are in some ways eerily parallel. One of the things that he had that Bunyan did not was a name for what he suffered: he had, we would say, a diagnosis. There is fresh air in his own discussion of his experience; he goes so far as to judge that though they could be a hindrance, scruples might also be a blessing: "Scruples are useful in the beginning of conversion.... they cleanse the soul, and at the same time make it careful." They can present the

sufferer before God, driving her to ask for his mercy. But they must not be allowed to rule. His ministry included careful and extraordinarily sophisticated advice on the development of conscience — in the scrupulous and in those whose temperament tends towards laxity.

When the scrupulous experience ongoing fear, even in the face of the advice of a wise confessor and the voice of the Church, St. Alphonsus says, he ought "to despise such fear, inasmuch as it forms no true verdict of conscience." In his writing, he drew from millennia of reflections on scrupulosity, its relationship to true conscience, and its cure, offering a digest of Christian wisdom on this topic. He is fond in particular of St. Philip Neri, in whose oratory he had originally intended to pursue ordination. He approvingly quotes from a life of St. Philip, in which the biographer describes the saint's approach to dealing with scrupulous parishioners: "Moreover, besides the general remedy of committing one's self altogether and for everything to the judgment of the confessor, he gave another, by exhorting his penitents to despise their scruples. Hence he forbade such persons to confess often; and when, in confession, they entered upon their scruples, he used to send them to Communion without hearing them."

Alphonsus quotes another priest, Father Wigandt, to support this ruthless approach: "He who acts against scruples does not sin; nay, sometimes it is a precept to do so, especially when backed by the judgment of the confessor. So do these authors speak, although they belong to the rigid school; so, too, the doctors in general; and the reason is, that if the scrupulous man lives in his scruples, he is in danger of placing grievous impediments in the way of satisfying his obligations, or, at least, of making any spiritual progress; and, moreover, of going out of his mind, losing his health, and destroying his conscience by despair or by relaxation."

One thing that the scrupulous fear is that they may be dodging their conscience; they don't want to make their conscience less sensitive. I was terrified of "hardening my heart" as Pharaoh did. But this misunderstands the nature of conscience. We should not go against conscience, but we must seek to inform and to form it: a sense of guilt or anxiety might be good information, or it might be a passion to be firmly put in place. The dramas of our Protestant imaginations have to do often with conscience that goes against authority: we are all Antigone, we are all Martin Luther King, or Martin Luther. Well — sometimes. But the ordinary way that conscience is formed is through interaction with just authority: there ought to be what Sohrab Ahmari, writing about St. John Henry Newman, describes as a "firm, dynamic alliance between conscience and authority for a bulwark over unjust power, including power over mind."

One's conscience should not be bullied, but it should be brought into the realm of the teachable. The temptation of the scrupulous person, if perhaps the scruples are not very bad and so she can imagine that there is some reason to them, is to think that she alone has access to truth, or is standing against the prophets of Baal. But the very word itself speaks against this. To hear con-science, to *know with*, is to not be cut off from others but to join them in apprehending something outside of all of you.

What's interesting is how distinct actual faith is from OCD, in my experience. I'm not sure I would know as clearly what it means that conscience is about relationship with God and others, not

about legalism, and that the cosmic/meaningful quality of the world is not a product of my own mind but something found in the world itself, if it weren't for my OCD and having to ruthlessly find out what is "real" and what is subjective head noise that doesn't point to meaningful obligation. It's hard to describe what I mean by this, but I'll try. OCD seems to charge the world, the material world and the world of action, with a kind of meaning. You have a strong sense of "enchantment," or of something that seems similar to that. There is almost too much meaning, everything you do is too weighty. One might think that this is all to the good: whatever else someone with OCD is going through they won't be a nihilist; they live in a world that is a bit too reenchanted for comfort.

But it is in learning to dismiss the louder internally-generated fake conscience voice that I've found my real conscience, and in learning to say no to false meaning that I felt welcomed into the true and objective meanings of the material world, and the moral world. In part, the difference can be seen in the fact that real, non-scrupulous conscience is "conscience," knowing with others. It is a communal thing: we are all seeing and desiring the same objective Good, which is God. And as we are drawn to him, we are drawn also to each other: true conscience opens us outwards to each other, helping us to show up for each other and really see and hear others as others. OCD-conscience is a lonely and isolating thing: you know that your own intense sense of guilt is a mere feeling, it is unmoored from the judgments of others, from tradition, from external reality, from the import of scripture.

To exit one's self-enclosed fake moral universe is to enter the real, external moral universe, which is the one we share with each other, the one where God is. I don't know how neurology and spiritual experience work together; but I can say with some certainty that there is probably something like a center for the perception of spiritual reality in one's mind, and maybe even brain; that it can get "clogged" with false data; and that when it is working as it ought, it is "hearing," sensing, the real meaning in the world: meaning both intense and highly-charged, but also grounded in a deep peace. The frantic buzzing that I had felt, like a bee trapped in a windowpane, exhausting itself and battering its body as it seeks to be free, was quieted, and I was able to use my moral energy as it should be used.

To experience this freedom is to understand something more about freedom than one did before. St. Alphonsus says that the scrupulous man "ought to set before himself obedience [to his confessor], and look upon his scrupulous fear as vain, and so act with freedom."

This understanding of freedom is one of the things about my own experience of scrupulosity which I find most illuminating. What does it mean to be free? When I was at my worst, I was not enslaved to any outside force. When Bunyan was imprisoned by Charles II's government, he was not as unfree as he was when he was shackled to his obsessive thoughts.

To be truly free is to have a conscience that responds docilely and alertly to reality, with and not against the whole body of Christ. To be truly free is to act with practiced and graceful practical reason, to be able to flexibly improvise with the grain of the universe, the sweetness of the Torah. To be truly free is to be able to rule oneself through reason, and also to freely and joyfully love the loveable. To be truly free is to be free to actually be present to others, rather than

to be so busy with your own mental suffering that you have no emotional or intellectual space for them. To be truly free is to stand un-accused, to know oneself at peace with Christ.

There are so many ways to get to this point, and of course I am not "here" all the time: but still, these are things that I know through direct experience. I have written often enough of the joy I have in not being a nihilist, the joy in being alive in a world full of meaning, and the contrast between that and the time when I did not believe that that meaning was in the world, and thought rather that it was only in my own mind.

But this second conversion — it is the second part of the story. It is what taught me that I am a participant in not just a possibly-pagan *meaning*, a non-nihilistic world, but also in the deep and utterly trustworthy goodness of Jesus who is my king. I am, now, free, or getting free. And my experience means that often when I contemplate what might be a real obligation to obedience to God's law, it's a very Psalm 27 kind of thing: a yearning to be closer to God, not to just shut my conscience up so I can do whatever I want without interference.

The good news here is that this is eminently subject to being sorted out. The first thing that helps is to know that this is a thing, to read memoirs and anecdotes of those who have suffered what are really very distinct and very persistently similar experiences. Read St. Therese of Lisieux. Read St. Alphonsus. Read John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. Read accounts from people in the Redemptorists' apostolate to the scrupulous. [1]

The second thing that helps — that helped me, anyway … sorry, this is annoying. But it's literally learning to trust God more. And that's not in the way you think that works when you're first converted, where "trusting God" is like this mental thing that you need to do in order to be saved, and which you might not be doing right, or doing enough, or doing right now, and you'd better check and try again. Rather, I just mean... living with Him as my King for longer, and learning that He is trustworthy and that I don't need to get theological answers before I am able to rest in that.

I've got a sort of mental box, Susannah's Big Box of Unanswered Theological Questions. One thing that was incredibly helpful was realizing that it's ok to have such a box, and that in all likelihood there are going to be items in it until I see God face to face, and possibly afterwards. But the fact that we have unanswered theological questions, that we don't see how all the data points of scripture and experience and tradition fit rationally together should not, not even for a moment, allow us to discount the data points we do have about God's character. That is one thing we do not need to doubt.

In the midst of the worst of this, I don't think I doubted the truth of the scriptures, either. That was part of the problem: scary passages felt like chains binding me, guns pointed at my head. But it meant also that I could hang on to the passages of unequivocal grace. "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for

[1] https://scrupulousanonymous.org/

us." "The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made." There is nothing original that I can offer here: these are uncompromising promises about God's trustworthiness in his character and in his love of each of us, and of those we love. I held on to these white-knuckled. And then, gradually, you realize that you don't need to hold on that tightly, because you yourself are held.

OCD threatens you with the loss of what you most value, as I've said. Scrupulosity threatens you with the loss of God, of your peace with him, your salvation — and if possible more painfully, with the loss of your ability to trust that He is good. In a strange way this should comfort the one who suffers from it. You really do value the pearl of great price at its worth, if that is what you're most horrified to lose.

As I say, I love being a Christian. I rejoice in God, and in my salvation. I hope that I never find myself again in such psychological pain that I am presented with apostasy as a kind of palliative; I pray that God will preserve me from that trial and I trust that if it comes, God will help me to once again say "yes" to faith, to living in the world as it is, even though it can feel easier to pretend that the world is otherwise. I know of some Christians who, I think, have in that moment of choice taken the blue pill, so to speak: have chosen unbelief as a relief. I don't know how deep such unbelief goes, whether it's something you need to reinforce in yourself because you're worried that if belief comes back the psychological pain will come back too, but I wouldn't be surprised. I think maybe in the back of such people's minds is the idea "God can see that it's too hard for me to believe in Him right now."

What I would say to anyone who is presented with that choice, tempted by the psychological comfort of apostasy in the face of such scrupulosity, such tormenting belief, is this: take the leap. In the face of that choice, pray for the grace of faith to be given to you in abundance. It is a grace: faith is a supernatural gift. Receive it and use it well.

And then throw the whole kit and caboodle at this thing: the Redemptorists, St. Therese, Bunyan, SSRIs, cognitive behavioral therapy, all of it.

And I would say this: You will be OK. You will rejoice again in believing. God is, as it happens, patient. And also, analogically though not univocally, good, and loving. And the ways in which his patience and goodness and love are not univocally identical with ours… He is more so, always more so, not less.

A version of this article first appeared at desiringGod.org

SUSANNAH BLACK IS AN EDITOR AT *MERE ORTHODOXY*, *PLOUGH*, THE DAVENANT INSTITUTE'S JOURNAL *AD FONTES*, AND FARE FORWARD. YOU CAN FIND MORE OF HER WRITING AT HER PERSONAL WEBSITE. SHE LIVES IN QUEENS, NY.

Meeting 'The Third Reformer'

BRUCE GORDON. *ZWINGLI: GOD'S ARMED PROPHET.* NEW HAVEN: YALE, 2021. XXII + 349 PP, $32.50.

AMY NELSON BURNETT

The contemporary of Martin Luther and predecessor of Jean Calvin within the Reformed family of churches, Ulrich Zwingli is sometimes described as "the third reformer." Reflecting the Swiss reformer's supposedly lesser status, there are few English-language studies of Zwingli's life and theology, and most of those that exist are either outdated or aimed narrowly at a scholarly audience. The new biography of Zwingli by the Yale church historian Bruce Gordon rectifies this imbalance, drawing on existing scholarship to introduce the Zurich reformer to a broader public. Gordon follows in the footsteps of his predecessor at Yale, Roland Bainton, whose 1950 biography of Luther, *Here I Stand*, set the standard for learned popular biographies two generations ago. Gordon's biography of Zwingli can also be seen as the pendant to his biography of Calvin, published in 2009 to coincide with the 500th anniversary of that reformer's birth.

Gordon's biography of Zwingli opens with an epigram from Machiavelli that inspired the book's subtitle, "God's armed prophet." According to Machiavelli, "all armed prophets have conquered, and the unarmed ones have been destroyed." The unarmed prophet to whom Machiavelli referred was the Dominican Girolamo Savonarola, whose efforts to reform Florence's religious and political

life ended with his execution in 1498. Zwingli, too, saw himself as a prophet called to spread the gospel and promote the creation of a God-pleasing society, but unlike Savonarola he did not shy away from advocating the use of force to achieve those goals. The irony, however, was that, at the personal level, he was no more successful than Savonarola, for in 1531 he was killed in a war between Zurich and the Catholic states of the Swiss Confederation. Zwingli's self-understanding as a prophet who was ultimately willing to use violence to carry out God's will is a central theme of Gordon's biography.

According to Gordon, an essential part of Zwingli's sense of calling as a prophet was his Swiss identity. The two most important influences on his early development, Swiss patriotism and humanism, were closely connected in his idealized view of the free Swiss people whose virtue was corrupted by the recruitment of mercenaries for financial gain. In this respect, he shared the pacifism promoted by the Dutch humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam. By 1515 Zwingli had also wholeheartedly embraced Erasmus's vision of a reformed Christian society built on the twin foundation of pagan and Christian antiquity. Zwingli assiduously studied Erasmus's edition of the Greek New Testament as well as both patristic and scholastic works while serving as a parish priest, first in Glarus and then in Einsiedeln.

The event that enabled Zwingli's subsequent prominence was his election as pastor of the Grossmünster, the most important church in Zurich, at the end of 1518. In the crucial period between the publication of Luther's 95 theses at the end of 1517 and the bull threatening the Wittenberg friar with excommunication in the summer of 1520, Zwingli became an ardent advocate of the reforms to religious praxis advocated by both Luther and Erasmus. A close brush with death from the plague in the fall of 1519 seems to have strengthened Zwingli's Christocentric piety and his willingness to challenge those in authority. By the spring of 1522, he was defending those who broke the Lenten fast and petitioning the bishop to allow clergy to marry. Rumors of Zwingli's sexual incontinence had almost derailed his appointment to the Zurich position, and at the beginning of 1522 he secretly married the widow Anna Reinhart. His actions reflect an approach to religious reform that moved from mere criticism to more positive actions. This was more than Erasmus could accept, and the Dutch humanist broke his ties with Zwingli in the spring of 1523.

The following two years were the most crucial of Zwingli's career. At a public disputation with representatives of the bishop of Constance in January 1523, Zwingli defended his teachings as based on the Word of God, with the support of Zurich's ruling council. A number of practical reforms were introduced over the course of 1524, from the removal of images from the churches to the closure of monasteries and convents. In the spring of 1525, the Mass was abolished and replaced with a new liturgy for celebrating the Lord's Supper that emphasized the remembrance of Christ's death and the gathered congregation as Christ's body. At the same time, some of Zwingli's earliest supporters broke with him over the issue of infant baptism. Zwingli defended that practice, and he approved the execution of those who rejected the baptism of infants as required by the city's government. To promote the correct interpretation of Scripture, he and his colleagues introduced the *Prophezei*, the daily public study of Scripture in its original languages followed by a sermon in the vernacular that applied its

teachings to the hearers. These sessions would be the foundation for the translation of the Bible into Swiss dialect, published in 1531.

As part of his description of Zwingli's reforms, Gordon addresses the vexed question of Luther's influence on Zwingli. Zwingli's own assertion — that he came to an understanding of the Gospel independently of Luther — was made at the height of the conflict between the two men over the Lord's Supper. As Gordon acknowledges, the judgment of past historians on this issue often reflected their own priorities, with German Lutherans arguing for Luther's influence and Swiss Reformed upholding Zwingli's theological independence. Gordon avoids the Scylla and Charybdis of earlier scholarship by pointing out that Zwingli first read and understood Luther through an Erasmian lens, and throughout the biography he points to Erasmus's influence on the Zurich reformer. Regarding the specific issue of the Lord's Supper, Gordon highlights the differences between Zwingli and Luther in their interpretation of the Bible and their vision of the Christian community. He suggests another difference between the two reformers when he describes Zwingli's fundamental theological conviction that God the Creator was goodness itself, providentially directing all things. While Luther would certainly not disagree about God's goodness, Zwingli's confidence is a far cry from Luther's concern with finding a gracious God who would not condemn sinful human beings. One senses the influence of Plato and later Neoplatonic writers on Zwingli's theology, although Gordon does not discuss this explicitly and mentions only in passing Zwingli's love of Plato.

In fact, Gordon devotes relatively little space to Zwingli's theology, with the important exception of a chapter on Zwingli's 1525 treatise *True and False Religion*, dedicated to the king of France. In contrast to many of Zwingli's other works, which were more limited in scope and more polemical in intent, *True and False Religion* was a broad presentation of evangelical teachings that described genuine Christian piety directed towards God as revealed in Christ and exercised through faith given by the Holy Spirit. Other themes important to Zwingli are addressed throughout the book: the freedom of the Christian's conscience from man-made laws, an understanding of God's relationship with humans in terms of an eternal covenant, and a vision of the church as a visible sacred community that contained both believers and unbelievers. As a biographer, however, Gordon is more concerned with helping his readers understand Zwingli's life than with overloading them with dense theological details.

His task becomes most challenging when describing Zwingli's final years, when the reformer's desire to spread the gospel to surrounding areas ran into strong opposition from the Catholic members of the Swiss Confederation. Abandoning his earlier pacifism, Zwingli supported Zurich's alliance with other Protestant cities in Switzerland and southern Germany as well as with Landgraf Philipp of Hesse, who was trying to craft a Protestant alliance against the Catholic emperor. By the summer of 1531, Zwingli was advocating aggressive measures against the Catholic states of central Switzerland. Their response to these measures was the war in which not only Zwingli but also many of Zurich's political leaders were killed in October of 1531. Zurich's defeat led to a political and religious crisis in the city, and it was left to Zwingli's successor, Heinrich Bullinger, to preserve Zwingli's legacy

of religious and social reform. Gordon does not devote much space, however, to the development of the Zurich reformation after 1531. Instead, his final two chapters consider the response to Zwingli's death among his contemporaries and the way historians have evaluated the reformer's life and career in the centuries since then. Zwingli's friends saw his death as a form of martyrdom, but Luther had no doubt that it was God's just judgment on a man he regarded as a heretic. Nineteenth-century Swiss Reformed historians turned Zwingli into a representative of democracy and Swiss patriotism, while those in the twentieth century drew attention to his social concerns and the close connection between politics and theology in his thought.

Gordon closes his biography with a discussion of the 2019 Swiss film *Zwingli* as an effort make the reformer accessible to a modern audience. As he acknowledges, Zurich today is a secular city, and many Swiss consider Zwingli at best irrelevant and at worse an embarrassment. Yet Zwingli played a decisive role in Swiss history, for the treaty ending the war in which he was killed established confessional boundaries within the Swiss Confederation that lasted into the modern era. Just as importantly, Zwingli was one of the founding fathers of the Reformed tradition, the form of Protestantism that would have such an impact on Europe and the world. Gordon's biography of Zwingli does an admirable job of introducing modern readers to the distant world of sixteenth-century Zurich and its reformer.

Note: In November 2021, the H. Henry Meeter Center for Calvin Studies at Calvin University hosted a webinar in which Bruce Gordon discussed his biography of Zwingli. That webinar is now publicly available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1Jh3cdNlNw.

AMY NELSON BURNETT IS THE PAULA AND D.B. VARNER UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN.

WHEN THE AD REPLACED THE ICON:

THE ANGEL IN THE MARKETPLACE BY ELLEN WAYLAND-SMITH

Ellen Wayland-Smith. *The Angel in the Marketplace.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. 288pp, $30.

TARA THIEKE

Throughout the 2010s the signs of a new holy month became undeniable. Each June seemed to mark an exponential increase in rainbow flags. Early summer became its own holiday season, only unlike Advent or Lent there was no Mass and Feast to which the season built. The consumption of Pride imagery was meant for all time and all places: everywhere, anywhere, nowhere. There was no particular point of celebrated incarnation.

That is the endgame of the marriage of capitalism and technocracy: a modular, manageable people willing to consume with no end-point, no fasts, no Feasts, stripped of particulars. This is the 24/7 culture of permanent capitalism where day is night and night is day, where the seasons are meaningless, let alone religious holy days. Millions who allowed President Reagan to be their sandman for Free Market dreams rubbed their eyes to find themselves floating in a culture immersed in the corporate-sponsored rhetoric of self-creation.

The phenomenon of Woke Capitalism confused people who identified, however clumsily they defined

the terms, as left or right. It flew in the face of decades of anti-advertising campaigns from leftists who had spent decades pointing out the social engineering and manipulation engaged in by Big Business. It troubled conservatives who imagined corporations, even as they protected their bottom line and outsourced millions of jobs across the ocean, to be allies of stability and traditional norms.

Woke Capitalism didn't have to catch us unawares. Edward Bernays, the 20th century father of modern propaganda renamed public relations, was frank about the need for social engineering via advertising. But Woke Capitalism did astonish people, and it has left both critics and supporters bewildered and sometimes in denial. Most tragically it has set left and right fighting one another over content as the significance of the phenomenon marches forward unencumbered.

This is the particular tragedy of Ellen Wayland-Smith's 2020 biography of one of the mid-20th century's premier women in advertising, Jean Rindlaub, *The Angel in the Marketplace*. It is this tragedy and its implications which require understanding if we are to retain some space for the person in a world dominated by for-profit institutions.

Jean Wade Rindlaub's life neatly straddles the 20th century with a career spent in the center of a solidifying neoliberal hegemony organized for private capital. With tireless good cheer and an emphasis on Christian womanly duties to the home and fatherland, she worked to electrify the mind of neoliberalism, re-ordering the desires and goals of the public according to the needs of corporations.

According to the author, her career is the prototype for the selfish individual female, "more Betty Draper than Peggy Olson." She sold millions of women the goods that kept them chained to domestic servitude while rejecting such a role for herself (or her daughter). She was personally delighted to work with men, to encourage women to enter the marketplace during World War II to keep manufacturing rolling, but participated in the post-war betrayal that pushed them back into their prison as soon as they were unnecessary. So much for sisterly solidarity! By page 6 Rindlaub has already been identified as a "collaborator."

A collaborator in what? The reader need not worry about being left in the dark. The perpetrator is identified on nearly every other page of the book: it is "the white patriarchal free market edifice," and "Judeo-Christian" hegemony. The condemnations are motivated by a sincere and well-documented anger at the crimes of Big Business, but a critical error is made in emphasizing where responsibility lies, and in that mis-placed emphasis Big Business has found the key to defending itself against meaningful structural change.

In the years following the 1999 WTO Seattle protests, the progressive movement endured a series of shocks: the initiation of the post-9/11 security state; the media build-up to the disastrous Iraq War only to be followed by all the major cheerleaders retaining their power; the religious fervor which elected President Obama only to be disappointed in the destruction of the public option and escalation of drone warfare and whistleblower persecutions.

Perhaps the most significant failure to stop the engine of neoliberalism was the collapse of the

Occupy Wall Street protests. The 2008 economic disaster punished the poor and marginalized for the sins of the wealthy, but all calls for justice went unanswered. The encampments were whisked off the streets by the end of the 2011-2012 winter.

The repeated failure to win concessions regarding class inequality and the surveillance state have been traumatic, and the human ego cannot endure too much failure. While this cycle of defeat was playing out, a new language of gender ideology was spreading like wildfire on blogs and Tumblr during the mid-aughts. Here was a ready-made consolation prize for the progressive justice crusade that Big Business was more than willing to offer. Soon after the tents and protestors were swept aside in the winter of 2011-2012, a dramatic escalation began that has been successfully documented: a notable increase in the use of identity language in legacy media, an interesting phenomenon previously relegated to social media sites and academia.

This burgeoning obsession with deconstructing and reconstructing gender roles has filled the void vacated by the movement for economic justice. One can sympathize with the progressive movement, disappointed when not outright betrayed by its leaders, desperate to make progress *somewhere*. But as Wayland-Smith clearly illustrates, the sentimentality she eschews in Rindlaub's 1950s portraits of domesticity is still at the core of corporate advertising. Throw out the home, now feature the rainbow. From the viewpoint of Big Business, so much the better.

Ivan Illich's seminal 1982 book *Gender* is critical to understanding where Wayland-Smith goes awry in her understanding of work-gender roles. It is a little confusing to the post-2010s reader to enter into his terminology, but if one is willing to do so, Illich distinguishes between something called "vernacular gender" and professional "key word" sex. Vernacular gender belongs to peasants. It arises from the complementarity of male/female and is a decentralized but deeply rooted and felt phenomenon that varies according to the needs of a community.

Key word sex roles appear with the rise of free market philosophy and enclosure, creating genuine sexist roles which segregate women in the home and men in the factories. These new sex roles predominantly benefit the upper class and as soon as they are felt to be a burden they are abandoned in favor of new uni-sex understandings. Upper-middle class women evoke the language of identity to rebel against the marketplace not being 50/50, failing to understand that the new system is far more alienating for the majority of females than the old kinship-based networks of vernacular gender.

This understanding is absent from contemporary discussions of gender ideology. Increasingly we are moved to a confused unisex understanding of the body. Wayland-Smith deplores the patriarchy while seeking a matriarchy, castigating men for chauvinism while demanding women display the same aggression and self-interest. All of this is rooted in advertising's successful skewing of the conversation, entrapping us in an upper-middle class, postmodern understanding rather than one rooted in the cycles of reproduction, child-rearing, food-gathering, cloth-making, protection, and death.

And so Wayland-Smith misses what is most insidious about what Rindlaub's work represents: a further transfer of power away from the home

in favor of a top-down organized marketplace, where housewives need to be guided by expertise as community life fractures and neighbors are drawn away from the community and into the marketplace to survive.

SELLING THE HOME: FIRST AS TARGET, THEN AS PRODUCT

This tale of how tools displaced creative impulses, the dissatisfaction found in women's housework as the home was relegated from a place of production to consumption, is peripheral to *The Angel in the Marketplace* when it should be central. Much of the conflicting 20th century attitudes towards working women is chalked up to the patriarchy rather than working to understand the causes of the schizophrenic reactions towards career women.

The 1950s home, the subject of much of Wayland-Smith's ire, had been made a place of consumption by a hundred years of industrialization. As community self-sufficiency was destroyed after the capture of the commons, lower-class women were frequently forced to work jobs of tedious drudgery. Meanwhile upper-middle class women equated the situations as they pursued jobs that did not scald the hands or wear out their feet.

Woke capitalism represents an extension of the same crisis: a co-option by capital of the imagery of civil rights movements to distract from the alienation inherent in monopolizing production. Wayland-Smith's story accepts that this conflict predates Rindlaub's career. Advertisers use the language of progressivism and social justice throughout the 1920s, but the genius of Woke Capitalism means Wayland-Smith primarily sees a Christian patriarchy imposing hypocritical, shaming virtues on the public rather than power centers cynically adopting the tone of the culture only as long as needed.

That capitalism and its advertising agencies have not repented but stayed true to their primary goal of self-growth is too painful for the modern social justice movement to wrestle with. This is an understandable tragedy. When confronted with the genuine lack of representation for people of color in post-war advertising, we hunger for justice. We yearn for peace and prosperity. But we should hunger for even more: for a radical rejection of advertising as a vehicle for our self-understanding.

For there is a contradiction in the heart of advertising: it is not a merely capitalist adventure. Advertising was a valued pursuit in the USSR, filling a critical space in an exploded society. Advertising is not bound solely to the marketplace but overflows the boundary of pre-20th century economic philosophies: it is tethered to the institutional capture of social and cultural life. Whether the powers that be define themselves as capitalist or communist, advertising is there to shift power from decentralized homes and communities to centralized bureaucracies.

In 1977 Christopher Lasch wrote,

"The history of modern society, from one point of view, is the assertion of social control over activities once left to individuals or their families. During the first stage of the industrial revolution, capitalists took production out of the household and collectivized it, under their own supervision, in the factory. Then they proceeded to appropriate the workers' skills and technical knowledge, by means of 'scientific management,'

and to bring these skills together under managerial direction. Finally they extended their control over the worker's private life as well, as doctors, psychiatrists, teachers, child guidance experts, officers of the juvenile courts, and other specialists began to supervise child-rearing, formerly the business of the family."

Lasch's work *Haven in a Heartless World* was, like Ivan Illich's *Gender,* taken as a great insult by upper-middle class feminists who monopolized public discourse regarding gender roles and child-rearing. Both Illich and Lasch, though, have found renewed relevance online in the early 2020s as former members of the DSA-left have struggled to understand why their movement was so easily derailed by corporate advertising campaigns.

To understand this, the critics of capitalism, whether they be social liberals or social conservatives, will have to move beyond tribalism to approach the kernel of the dilemma articulated by many thinkers and even saints over the past 100 years: the tool is as significant as the content, and it is the tool which is re-modeling our ways of understanding reality.

THE AD AND THE ICON: TWO OPPOSITE WAYS OF KNOWING

The most serious accusations one can level against Rindlaub's work was not the content, however infantilizing and hypocritical it often was, but the existence of the work itself. Advertising by its very nature attempts to capture our attention, selling off increasingly more of existence in order to grow itself. Mass marketing attempts to reorient human attention for the purpose of profit.

Rindlaub studied housewives. Committees tracked their every purchase; the homemaker was treated as a lab rat. Was this in order to discover what she needed? Rindlaub wished to believe she "taught women how to think of consumption as an act of love." This was the tragic self-delusion. The data-harvesting was not to see if women needed more friends, closer kin, cleaner water, or a spouse within vocal range during the day. Rather it was to redefine love as something to be purchased. For Wayland-Smith, though, it is Jean's Christian veneer of patriotic motivations that are toxic, not the presumption to data-mine and manipulate.

Wayland-Smith's tale, which is rooted in the post-Occupy progressive emphasis on identity over class, is of a woman who believes in the tool of advertising for social betterment and whose definition of social betterment was post-war suburban patriarchal Christianity. Wayland-Smith sees that purpose as bad and the tool as bad when put to that end. Her book gives Rindlaub a redemption arc in later life as Jean comes to believe in racial and gender equality, and hints Rindlaub begins to doubt whether the tool of advertising was indeed a good tool.

But Wayland-Smith never grapples with the dangers of the tool itself, never touches at all that in our current day the tool is cynically wielded to deflect critiques of economic injustice because, at the moment, some of her own causes are celebrated. Advertising campaigns celebrate self-definition; it's good for business. The implications of big business's adoption of this previously underground discourse remain unaddressed by the post-Sanders left.

Towards the end of Rindlaub's life she began to

appreciate the need for diversity in advertising. If we narrow the scope of "the common good," then indeed, commercials which reflect the actual people of the United States are good. Visible representation is undeniably important.

However, a society where organic and bottom-up cultural life is stripped away, where the power of icon and religion and the practice of music and the arts are diminished in the lives of most people, then the advertisement as the primary signifier of cultural self-understanding becomes a danger which no amount of diversity can off-set. A world where anything and everything is for sale is a greater message than the contents of any given ad.

Functionalists accept advertising as necessary, even good, in a world governed by economic growth. There is a refusal to acknowledge the shift from commodity to brand-based advertising, to reckon with the power given to advertisers to shape our self-understanding, or to confront how unconstrained advertising affects consciousness and health.

We see 4,000 to 10,000 advertisements a day. They are never far from awareness; indeed, significant subconscious efforts are made to fight them off. Pinging, buzzing, flashing, shouting; pop-ups, billboards, signs, commercials. The phone hears a carelessly spoken word and its owner is inundated with advertisements for something they weren't even sure they had said aloud.

They fracture our attention, spike our cortisol, distort our landscapes, increase our feelings of inadequacy, and are impervious to escape attempts. They diminish our attention to reciprocal relationships and demand we instead focus on pre-engineered messages. Advertising seeks to capture the attention commons, what Ivan Illich named the vernacular world and is the foundation of a conscious society, and hollow it out for private profit. Jacques Ellul wrote of the great and terrible noise of this propaganda:

"One thought drives away another; old facts are chased by new ones. Under these conditions there can be no thought. And, in fact, modern man does not think about current problems; he feels them. He reacts, but he does not understand them any more than he takes responsibility for them."

The half-hearted struggle to grapple with the deepest implications of Rindlaub's work is due to the failure to accept what unconstrained advertising is doing to society and what advertising necessarily does to a society. Whatever the content, such manipulation and attempts to monopolize attention do harm to individual and social well-being. The advertisement is the aggressive replacement of the icon. It represents the roof we put over our world to shield ourselves from the transcendence of the stars. The advertising industry is the flattening of all that cannot be sold.

The icon invites contemplation while the ad uses noise to disarm contemplation. It is at odds with poetry and destroys the ability to perceive the world without profit-seeking or mediation by an institution. It seeks to fill the silence of thought with its own noise. It brooks no mystery. There is no room for the 'other' who can be imagined. The world Rindlaub and her committees of women in swishing skirts, noting every soap purchase, is a de-sacralized and fractured world with everything, including the home, including the

housewife's labor, for sale.

4,000 to 10,000 advertisements a day. How many icons do we see a day? How many images of reverence that invite contemplation? How many of those are drowned out by their own noise?

"Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity," wrote Simone Weil. Advertisers once would have us believe we suffered from an inadequate facial lotion, improper floor wax. Today's advertisers would have us believe the same things, but whereas once they used the language of serving husband and country, now the imagery is soaked in progressive social causes. But advertising in its nature seeks to induce anxiety and fracture our attention, to manipulate our deep need to be known by throwing our sense of inadequacy in our face and rendering us dependent.

The breakdowns induced by advertising cannot be healed by Rindlaub's post-war norms or today's identitarian progressive ones. The antidote is, rather, a different way of approaching reality. Attention is what advertising destroys even as it hungers for it, and it is our capacity to bestow attention and care which remains beyond the reach of packaging.

The post-2010s progressive movement means well but without a renewed appreciation for goods which cannot be sold it will continue to sentimentalize a corporate-sponsored version of justice in the same way Rindlaub sentimentalized a corporate-sponsored version of domesticity. Without the Beatific Vision, without an understanding of the inherent need to be makers and creators, without attention to the peace beyond name number and profit, then our digital billboards, eavesdropping phones, and endless pop-ups will continue to proliferate, distract, and immiserate.

The advertising way of knowing is the way of control and manipulation. It is doomed to breed anxiety. If we allow our attention to the transcendent to enter into our understanding, then we may once again know in a different way: one oriented around communion rather than control. If we do, then we will know the great gift of the permanent things, including the home, including justice, which are particular gifts that cannot be sold.

TARA THIEKE IS A HOMEMAKER AND WRITER. SHE CAN BE VISITED ON TWITTER AT @TARAANNTHIEKE.

Loving Newcastle

MICHAEL CHAPLIN. *NEWCASTLE UNITED STOLE MY HEART:* SIXTY YEARS IN BLACK AND WHITE. LONDON: HURST AND CO, 2021. 280PP, $25.00.

JAKE MEADOR

The first thing to say is that Michael Chaplin's *Newcastle United Stole My Heart* is one of the most delightfully vivid and colorful books I've read in many years. The joy begins almost immediately as we meet Chaplin's family in the opening pages: a writer father who worked late hours, hunched over his desk in a haze of cigarette smoke where he would receive a mug of tea from Michael before the boy went to bed, and his grandfather, who scanned the newspaper every day looking at births, marriages, and deaths, which he referred to as "hatches, matches, and dispatches." Chaplin reports that he rather enjoyed seeing all the "dispatches" who he had managed to outlive despite a typically rugged, difficult life in early 20th century northeast England. Everything about the book is rendered with love, vibrancy, and attentive delight. At one point, a friend of Chaplin's describes former FIFA president Sepp Blatter as the sort of man who has "50 ideas a day — and 51 of them are bad." Chaplin's book, ostensibly about soccer, is really a love letter to the city of Newcastle and the soccer players who have delighted the city over six decades.

Chaplin describes particular Newcastle goals with the same detail and delight that I slip into when remembering certain Nebraska football players or plays. Yet there is something about soccer that lends itself to a spontaneous joy that football struggles to match. Often its greatest moments of genius are bits of improvisation dreamed up in an athlete's head seconds before they are executed, sometimes coming after

an hour of tedious, unimaginative play. The game can be slow, almost relentlessly boring at times, and then, for that one moment, the ball bounces just right, a player has a moment of inspiration, and something incredible happens that you'll remember for the rest of your life, perhaps even sometimes trying to act it out to your friends or children. Anyone who loves sports, and especially soccer, will understand the delight that pervades Chaplin's book.

But there's something more happening in Chaplin, I think. When Chaplin writes about memorable Newcastle goals, he is often (though not always) writing about goals he saw in person. His first steps toward fandom came when, as a six-year-old boy newly arrived in the English Northeast, he heard the roar of St James's Park while playing in his front yard. His next steps were attending matches, talking about the games with school friends, and crowding the newsstand for the early edition of the evening newspaper when Newcastle played away matches and the results often first reached fans at home via the evening paper. In short, everything about his experience of fandom involved being with other people and sharing a place with them — and sharing much more besides. The context of the English northeast pervades everything about the common life he shares with his fellow Newcastle supporters.

In contrast, nearly all my memories of sports, whether it's Nebraska football or Tottenham Hotspur in soccer or the Phoenix Suns in basketball, come with me sitting alone in my home, watching games on my computer or TV. I've been to perhaps 30 Husker home games in my life, but I've watched hundreds. And Nebraska football is my least mediated sports obsession. I've never seen Tottenham play in-person and the last Suns game I attended in person was nearly 30 years ago. If the game is ultimately simply about what happens on the field, of course, and nothing else really matters, then this may be of trivial importance. But I don't think that's true. There is a translation that happens between the in-person experience and the mediated screen experience that is significant.

In her book *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt says that,

> To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.

It is easy to identify the "things" that exist between Newcastle fans. It's the entirety of the English Northeast: the persistence and toughness borne of years spent in the pits and mines that powered England's industrial ascent, the simultaneously harsh and beautiful landscape of the region, and the stubborn hopefulness that keeps drawing the Toon Army, a nickname for Newcastle fans, to St. James's Park every season. Framed this way, there is a kind of feedback loop, which can be virtuous or vicious, of course, between the fate of the Newcastle United Football Club and the health and happiness of the place, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. And even in the lean times, of which there have been many, Newcastle United is so much a part of the fabric of life in the Northeast, that games continue to be well-attended, the club's fortunes and follies followed closely by millions in the region.

It is much harder to identify the metaphorical "table" that I and my fellow Tottenham fans gather around today. I suppose it must be our laptops, Slack rooms, and the various undersea

cables that allow us to connect to the internet and both watch the games and chat with our fellow fans. But, of course, that means our fandom is rooted in the "world of things" in only the most nebulous and vague ways. Indeed, it is rooted in a mass of privately owned things or remote things, neither of which do we access together. This is a sharp departure from the young boys crowding around the newsstand on a Saturday evening on Tyneside in the 1960s. Those boys, Chaplin amongst them, were unified around a specific place in a way that we fans of today, hunched over our laptops on Saturday mornings, never will be. And so even if the laptop or the Slack channel is a "table" of sorts, it is a meager one.

What ultimately unifies us is not necessarily this "world of things," but rather the "world" of our own will and sentiment. We choose to like Tottenham. We feel happy when they win and sad or upset when they fail.

This reality serves the interest of the capitalist class, of course: A large mass of willful people whose moods are easily predicted and equally easy to monetize make for a great customer base, after all. But I do not think it is good news for the "table," for the "world of things" that forms the basis of community or even good news for those fans-turned-consumers.

One of the thoughts I had while reading this book, admittedly a predictable one I suppose, is that I don't think anyone alive today could, in 30-40 years, write a book like this, chronicling 60 years of following a team. The reasons are many. There is a whimsy, easy joy, and utter lack of self-regard that runs through Chaplin's prose and when I imagine people my age and younger, none of those qualities come quickly to mind. But there are others as well. Much of the delight of the book is wrapped up in its careful attentiveness to one unique place on earth. But in an age of mass media, it is much easier for cities to look more like each other.

Newcastle is a city that belongs to northeast England. But many of our great cities today imagine themselves belonging to the cosmos far more than they do the surrounding countryside and region. The multi-generational households that birth this book are largely gone — indeed, it seems increasingly likely that more and more of us will grow up not only without grandparents in our homes, but without grandparents at all as the age when women have children gets later and later. And so as one reads *Newcastle United Stole My Heart*, it can almost feel like watching an admittedly more blue collar episode of some historical BBC drama, drawing the reader back into a world long forgotten. I would like to think that in another 40 years, someone my age might write a book like this one, chronicling a lifetime spent with a particular team and place and culture. But that seems unlikely. And the loss is worth grieving.

JAKE MEADOR IS THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF MERE ORTHODOXY. HE LIVES IN HIS HOMETOWN OF LINCOLN NE WITH HIS FAMILY.

Who's Going to Clean the Toilets in Your Utopia?

Anna Neima. *The Utopians: Six Attempts to Build the Perfect Society.* London: Picador, 2021. 320pp, $39.95.

MATTHEW LOFTUS

"I saw a horse collapse in the street: the driver was knocked aside by the starving people, who rushed to cut chunks from the warm body to bring home to their families." So wrote Eberhard Arnold , founder of the Bruderhof, in Germany in 1917. His observation captures a slice of the devastation that World War I wrought across the world. The sheer loss of life (20 million people, more than half of whom were civilians) was staggering , but the cultural and social disruptions were just as intense and widespread. The war (and the Spanish Influenza pandemic that overlapped it, also killing millions) shattered a widespread sense of confidence that technological development, national pride, and religious devotion would march onwards with a better life for all, leading many to rethink how mankind ought to think, believe, and live — and for some, to found

communities where they could live out these new, idealistic aspirations.

Anna Neima's *The Utopians* (Pan Macmillan, 2021) profiles six of these communities, following each one from the early lives of their inevitably idiosyncratic founders to their (with one exception) collapse. Readers of *Mere Orthodoxy* are likely familiar with that one exception, the Bruderhof, and its differences from the other utopian communities are particularly worth noting (even if Neima doesn't necessarily give them the attention they deserve). Still, many of us who would like to imagine a life together that rejects the spirit of our age will find these stories of what made these communities succeed and fail is by turns fascinating, challenging, and even instructive.

FROM THE ASHES

The cultural, social, technological, and political forces that brought about World War I were also many of the same forces that made it so devastating to its survivors. The unique and novel horrors themselves — chemical weapons, trench warfare, aerial bombing — were bad enough on their own, but advances in communications also brought their ugly realities to the masses in unprecedented ways through photography, film, and the telegraph. Jingoistic platitudes could not obscure the horrors of the trenches, underscoring the pointlessness of a war in which mass mobilization and national sacrifice (Neima notes that Germans were forced to endure "the turnip winter" on less than a thousand calories a day in 1916) affected every member of the population in some way.

One of the more uncomfortable realities of the war was its religious character. As Philip Jenkins argues in his book *The Great and Holy War*, support for the war among churches and Christian leaders was both widespread and enthusiastic to the point that many at the time considered it a religious crusade. Across many different denominations and nations, Christians assumed and proclaimed that God was on their side. Even Bruderhof founder Eberhard Arnold began his literary career with a steady stream of nationalist articles and books praising the war effort.

In the aftermath of the conflict, then, there was profound disillusionment with the status quo — perhaps especially with the religious status quo. Churches both liberal and conservative had proudly expected that God wanted them to win, so many people turned away from mainstream denominations to occult spirituality, quasi-mystical psychology (Jungian and otherwise), radical Christian theological traditions, and a melange of pluralistic philosophies. Central to all of the communities profiled in *The Utopians* was the idea that spiritual transformation, both individually and socially, was essential to redeeming the world from the forces that had wreaked so much chaos.

That chaos and the collective trauma of the

[35] Neima asserts these figures but does not document them. It is unclear if any reliable count of utopian communities as she defines them has ever been made or can be made.

past decade led some to the hedonism of the Roaring Twenties in America, but others saw it as an opportunity for radical transformation. Industrialization had poisoned the environment, militarism had poisoned brotherly love, and *laissez-faire* capitalism had poisoned the cooperation necessary for human flourishing. The "dozens" of utopian communities in "hundreds of guises" that sprung up in the interwar period[1] showed that people were hungry for change, and they were willing to totally rethink social mores, spiritual concepts, and economic principles in order to create a better world.

Neima divides the six communities she profiles into two groups. The first, she argues, focused on "complete self-actualization" as the means to social change; in these places free expression and transformation of one's self was achieved by creating environments where anyone could pursue their educational, artistic, and spiritual inclinations while also contributing to a self-sustaining community. In this category she places Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan-Sriniketan in India, Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst's Dartington Hall in England, and Mushanokōji Saneatsu's Atarashiki Mura in Japan. The second group required adherence to a more specific (though often no less pluralistic) credo, assuming that world peace and harmonious living would follow if everyone in the group followed the founders' philosophies and recruited others to do the same.

To be quite frank, I was unimpressed with the non-Bruderhof communities in the second group (G. I. Gurdjieff's Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man and Gerald Heard's Trabuco College). Gurdjieff's primary legacy is the first recorded use of the Enneagram[2] and Heard is notable for the people who came to Trabuco (including Aldous Huxley and AA founder Bill Wilson) and his influence on the counterculture a generation later. Both founders could more or less be described as charismatic cranks who convinced wealthy dupes to fund unsustainable communities in exchange for access to pseudospiritual blather. The aforementioned openness to spirituality of all kinds (especially spirituality that claimed to be the key to peace) made people more susceptible to such blather, but the Tony Robbins of yesteryear are not especially relevant to this review.

THE UTOPIAN COMMUNITIES

Rabindrath Tagore, writer of the Indian national anthem and the first non-Western Nobel Prize winner in 1913, founded Santiniketan-Sriniketan with the goal in mind of creating a community that could preserve the goods of simple village life and Eastern religion while incorporating the insights and benefits of Western science and philosophy. He also argued, to great applause in the West, that the rapacious appetites of Western nations for conquest and profit needed to be rebuked by Eastern wisdom. His speaking tours after his Nobel Prize had created a rich network of donors that he could call upon to fund his vision, and after a few years he had built a community

[35] Gurdjieff did not develop the familiar Enneagram of Personality (AKA horoscopes for people who went to college), though his work influenced those who did.

across two campuses where classes on art, philosophy, history, religion, music, literature, agriculture, trades, and crafts took places under trees or in small huts. Leonard Elmhirst, a young Englishman who had studied at Cornell, helped Tagore set up his model farm at Santiniketan-Sriniketan. The farm had its early climax in a struggle between Tagore and Elmhirst against several students over whether the students would empty the latrine buckets themselves — Tagore prevailed, and people came from all over the world to work and study in a model of cooperation and harmony.

However, the practical farm at Sriniketan and the intellectual school at Santiniketan never truly came together as one community, and the students who had flocked to Santiniketan in order to study under the trees demanded diplomas so that they could have appropriate credentials for work within the status quo while total social revolution tarried. The school thus institutionalized itself out of the utopian vision it had been founded upon. Tagore had no talent for administration, never groomed a successor, and found himself constantly needing to withdraw into solitude to write. He was dejected by the rise of fascism in his final years and disagreed with Mahatma Gandhi's nationalist strategy for Indian independence. However, as his death drew near he asked Gandhi to take charge of the community, which endured only as a loose collection of mainstream trade schools and a university.

Leonard Elmhirst left Santiniketan-Sriniketan in 1924 to wed Dorothy Straight (nee Whitney), the daughter of a railroad tycoon and widow of a First World War veteran who succumbed to the influenza pandemic. They returned to Leonard's homeland to buy a broken-down country estate with Dorothy's inheritance and started their own rule-free, self-directed school as well as a farm that used cutting-edge technology like tractors. Artists, dancers, musicians, potters, actors, and writers were invited to join Dartington Hall with free rein to create as they wish, with surrounding aristocratic neighbors suspicious of the community and local laborers hired to carry out the Elmhirst's endless ideas befuddled but amused.

It had always been the Elmhirsts' plan for all members of Dartington to democratically deliberate about decision-making within the community, but when the Elmhirsts weren't simply asserting authority wherever they could (after all, they controlled the funds), they were holding community meetings in which farmhands were expected to engage with professors on equal terms. The different parts of the community naturally ensconced themselves, with the artists becoming more flamboyant and the more practical endeavors attempting to become self-sustaining in the face of the worldwide Great Depression. The school attracted the children of progressive elites around the world, and by the time Britain's postwar Labour government began to carry out its own progressive ideas, Dartington had become downright mainstream. It is now "a centre for progressive learning in arts, ecology and social justice" according to its website, and, in Naima's estimation, anticipated midcentury social changes more than it inspired them.

In Mushanokōji Saneatsu's Atarashiki Mura in Japan, unity was not as important as self-actualization. Mushanokōji was a writer whose career took off when he started publishing a

literary magazine focused on self-love; he found the traditional cultural communitarianism and nationalism stifling (especially as it became more militarist) and as an elite he feared the upheaval of a socialist or communist-leaning proletariat. Hearing Tagore speak and reading Tolstoy and the Bible led Mushanokōji to believe that a different kind of community was required to self-actualize; he would need an alternative way of life that would contrast with the diverging (and increasingly violent) mainstream values on either side. Mushanokōji's utopian vision was that a place where individuals could be themselves to the fullest was one where egalitarian love between people would also flourish (and vice-versa).

Mushanokōji bought a remote piece of farmland and set off with a few followers to live out this apparently contradictory vision at a place they called Atarashiki Mura. Previsaging Patreon by a century, he offered subscribers to his magazine the opportunity to pay a monthly fee to be a spiritual part of the community — a downright necessary component of his community's sustainability, considering that none of these urban poets knew anything about farming. Mushanokōji remained idealistic through severe weather, abandonment by his followers (even his wife), and hunger; despite high turnover there were a few stalwarts who slowly learned how to farm and still have enough energy at the end of the day for creating their own art. They stayed even when Mushanokōji himself left; he remained a patron, perhaps because the idea was always more appealing to him on paper than anything else. Yet other people were inspired to start their own Atarashiki Mura-type communities in Japan and even Mao Zedong wrote early in his career of how he wished to organize his own. Always flitting from one new idea to the next, Mushanokōji became so supportive of Japan's WWII that he was condemned as a war criminal by the American occupation even though his community still endures today as a small collective farm run by less than a dozen people.

The Bruderhof, which Neima acknowledges to be the most successful of all the communities in the book, began in 1920 in Sannerz, Germany with Eberhard and Emmy Arnold's family and a handful of others. The postwar "youth movement" in Germany was engaged in all sorts of different rejections of the mainstream values that they blamed for the war, ranging in intensity from folksong-singalongs to farming communes. The Arnolds, having undergone intense soul-searching during the war, felt that if they devoted themselves to the principles of the early Church as recorded in Acts. their actions would inspire others to reject the militarism and nationalism that had deceived even them and led Germany into such a horrific war.

Unlike the other communities, the Bruderhof was a place truly open to all — and truly all came. Perhaps it was the fact that Germans had been more profoundly and intimately affected by the war, but there was much more local openness to their vision. Everyone from famed philosopher Martin Buber to bedraggled ex-convicts fresh from prison came to visit; Neima reports that in 1921 alone, the new community hosted 2500 visitors. Their own unity came mostly through community meetings with preaching and singing; they integrated well with the local community and participated in village events. Like other utopian communities, they struggled to learn how to farm and were perpetually running low

on money — though it helped that anyone who joined for life gave all of their personal wealth into the communal fund.

Members of the Bruderhof worked hard, but the consistent practice of giving to all in need stretched finances thin while greater threats loomed on the horizon. Eberhard managed to stave off financial collapse by joining the very similar (but far more stable) Hutterites as a "daughter colony," even though this meant that they had to give up their free-spirited youth movement outfits (often colorful) for a strict dress code. More difficult was the problem of Nazism; as Hitler grew in strength the SS regularly began to raid the community and terrify members into joining the Nazi Party. Eberhard sent a manifesto directly to Hitler pleading for him to embrace the power of love, but when Germany introduced compulsory military service in 1935 all of the men of military age were forced to flee to Lichentenstein. At the end of the year, Eberhard himself died from complications of a bone infection.

The community pressed on without their founder, fleeing again to Britain and then again to Paraguay when, at the start of WWII, the government looked askance at a commune full of foreigners who refused to fight in the war. From there, Bruderhof members have founded communities all over the world holding to the simple teachings of peaceableness, devotion to God, and love for others. Even today one can read their *Plough* magazine in multiple languages or visit one of their communities to experience their hospitality in person.[3] Their endeavors, now far more profitable than hardscrabble farming, support charitable works across the world.

A BETTER WORLD IS PLAUSIBLE

What can we learn from these wild-eyed utopians and their schemes to remake the world one small commune at a time? Certain themes emerge: charismatic leaders can induce followers to start anything, but sustained growth requires structure and, if one has a back-to-the-land bent, someone who knows how to make use of a hoe and pitchfork. Any group of idealists, no matter how committed they are to love and harmony, will have disputes over the dirty chores and the direction of the community. There will always be an attraction to hodgepodge spiritualities, and the Bride of Christ will send people scurrying for these heresies if it identifies itself too closely with violent national interests. Worldwide disaster and social unrest will induce soul-searching that can make people open to a new way of life — or more violent national interests, as the utopians who watched their communities wither in the runup to WWII saw.

One hundred years later, many of the utopians' concerns are ours. Advances in technology have made environmental destruction and human alienation from one another even worse, even as they have given idealists more opportunity to connect with one another across the world and

[3] Full disclosure: The author of this piece and the editor-in-chief have written for Plough and experienced Bruderhof hospitality in person. Both are highly recommended experiences.

do far more good both locally and globally (not to mention sparing us a repeat of the devastation that the influenza pandemic wrought). Wars still displace and destroy vulnerable people across the world, but since Americans and Europeans are not threatened there is rarely enough political will to end them and no clear solution for many conflicts. The excesses of capitalism, modernism, and liberalism (neo- or plain) inspire countless diatribes grasping for alternatives.

Are practical utopias like Santiniketan-Sriniketan or Dartington Hall a worthwhile alternative? Neima seems to think so:

> The example of planned community living, for instance, became an inspiration for the international community development movement that took off after the Second World War. The holism of Dartington Hall fed into Britain's welfare state. The low-impact lifestyle of the Bruderhof and Atarashiki Mura prefigured the environmental movement. Tagore's ideal of liberal, practical education influenced the school system of the whole of India. Even Heard and Huxley's embrace of psychedelics and Gurdjieff's promotion of full wakefulness rather than 'unconscious' living found their way into mainstream psychological discourse and the business methods of Silicon Valley. The people who passed through these social experiments picked up ideas and then reworked and re-enacted them in other settings. At the same time, the very existence of such radical communities conveyed, even to those who never saw them at first hand, a message about the possibility of the world being otherwise than it was.
>
> [...]
>
> Criticizing the status quo is rarely enough to create real change – whether that criticism comes in the form of marches, petitions, policy papers or satirical tweets. What we need are laboratories to devise, test and demonstrate new ideas and systems; concrete experiments that prove the viability of what otherwise would remain nothing more than an alluring set of ideas. While few practical utopias last for long, utopian living is extraordinarily generative. It creates openings in the fabric of society, inspires change, reminds us that it is possible to reach beyond the dominant assumptions of our day and discover radically different ways of being.

The Bruderhof deserve far more credit for their endurance beyond their "low-impact lifestyle." Neima notes that religious utopias tend to endure for longer than non-religious ones, thanks to the fact that their core beliefs are not as flexible or subject to a founder's whims. The Bruderhof's tenacity speaks to the Holy Spirit's blessing on their faithfulness and their simple rule forbidding members from talking about one another behind their back[4] helps to explain how they have succeeded where many others failed.

There are, I would suspect, two different groups

[4] The advent of this rule, which Neima describes as a turning point for the community, has also been attested to the author by members of the community as one of the defining factors in the community's endurance.

of Christians for whom a book like *The Utopians* is worthwhile. The first are those who are too comfortable with the mainstream values of acquisition and success that characterize our late modern world, indistinguishable from their non-Christian neighbors except for a few political and religious beliefs. These brothers and sisters would benefit from opening their eyes to the plausibility of a more radical practice of our faith — not necessarily going Full Bruderhof, but embracing more of the ancient Christian tradition of hospitality to the vulnerable, for example.

The second group are those who are on board with a radical critique of our modern era but usually settle for fighting back against the encroachment of liberalism in whatever outrage-of-the-week culture war guise it might take. For these folks, many of whom are already fantasizing about creating their own little utopias, this book is a stern dose of reality reminding us (for I count myself among the utopia-fantasizers) that starting the community is the easy part. Conflicts about who is going to clean the toilets are far more likely to be relevant than one's beliefs about the legitimacy of the liberal order, and even if one manages to raise enough money to keep the lights on there is no guarantee that the forces of evil won't tear you apart from the outside — or the inside.

Neima has written a fascinating set of stories about a series of communities and their founders by turns compelling, bizarre, and inspiring. I found myself wishing most chapters were longer as I reached the end of each and a little sad as each utopia struggled to endure. As people who believe that Christ's perfect reign on Earth is inevitable and in some way coming to fruition now, some of us might need to do a little more utopian dreaming but all of us could do with a little more practice as if that reign is here among us.

MATTHEW LOFTUS TEACHES AND PRACTICES FAMILY MEDICINE IN BALTIMORE AND EAST AFRICA. HIS WORK HAS BEEN FEATURED IN CHRISTIANITY TODAY, COMMENT, & FIRST THINGS AND HE IS A REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR FOR CHRIST AND POP CULTURE. YOU CAN LEARN MORE ABOUT HIS WORK AND WRITING AT WWW.MATTHEWANDMAGGIE.ORG.

Finding Belonging in the City

CHAD BRYANT. *PRAGUE: BELONGING IN THE MODERN CITY*. CAMBRIDGE: HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2021. 352PP, $29.95.

ADDISON DEL MASTRO

Historian Chad Bryant has produced a moving and deeply informative book in *Prague: Belonging in the Modern City*. The book's structure, consisting chiefly of five mini-biographies of illustrative, but not very well known, Praguers from the 1800s to the present day, also treats the evolving city itself as a main character. Each chapter illustrates a particular period in the city's life via its subject, underscoring the symbiosis between Prague and its people.

The theme of *Prague* is the resistance of these five subjects to the reigning, overbearing ideological conception of the city in their time. They are people who don't quite fit; a Czech in German Prague, a Jew in Czech Prague, a Vietnamese-born woman in a Prague now global and capitalist, but still largely defined by its historical ethnic identities.

Their manners of resistance and their ways of finding belonging in a city that is theirs on the ground but not quite in the general imagination are unique, and sometimes contradictory. Travel writer Karel Vladislav Zap resists German cultural hegemony in determining Prague's essential character, by emphasizing Czech culture and landmarks in his writing. The Jewish, German-speaking journalist Egon Erwin Kisch carves out some space apart from the increasing Czech hegemony that fulfilled Zap's vision. Working-class carpenter Vojtech Berger builds Communism through mass politics and Party social events in a city where Communists are suspect. Actress Hana Frejková resists Communism and the "socialist city" with the limited freedom of theater. Vietnamese-born blogger Duong Nguyen Jiraskova

struggles "with a sense of belonging in a nation-state that implied a national homogeneity that was racially coded."

These five subjects all sought to circumvent marginalization and exclusion while still making and calling Prague their home. "Their stories follow the rise of nationalism," Bryant writes, "while exposing tensions between homogenizing national imaginations and the persistence of urban diversity."

At times, Bryant seems hostile not only to nationalism but even to the symbols that help give it form. Nations are "conjured into existence," he writes, expressing a common academic view. But he also speaks of the difficulty of fitting in "for those inhabiting an environment thick with symbolic reminders of their otherness." Has Bryant penned an entire book about a historic city, only to suggest that the actually existing city, slowly and incrementally built up, is somehow offensive, or inferior to an abstract ideological conception of it? Is Prague only an idea?

Not so fast.

Bryant's views are not left or right as much as anti-authoritarian, complemented by a particularly urbanist understanding that cities are complex, diverse places that by their very nature resist appropriation by any one particular community or historical understanding. This does not mean, as conservatives sometimes allege, that cities are mere assemblages of atomized, autonomous individuals. Rather, they're home to many overlapping communities, but not particularly defined by any one of them. And, as Bryant admits as he winds down the book, "national imaginations are also a form of belonging"; there is more in a city than in anyone's philosophy. It is this continuous evolution and interplay between the old and the new that makes cities tick. The irony, perhaps, is that nationalists could turn even *blood and soil* into abstractions.

Bryant does not deny the realness or goodness of the city as it actually exists on the ground. Quite the opposite; he argues convincingly that it is ideology, whether nationalism or Communism, which denies *actually existing* diversity. In fact, he speaks of "recasting Prague," from a narrow ideological symbol to "a particular city characterized by extraordinary differences and immense changes over time." He juxtaposes national treasures and local customs. The change, as much as the constancy, is a fundamental part of the city's fabric and reality. He writes of migrants, for example, that they are "there but not acknowledged as being there."

Change and continuity wind together throughout the book. In one bit of continuity, Berger's Communist May Day parades — described by the lovely Czech word *manifestace*, meaning bodily demonstration — resembled Bohemia's old religious pilgrimages and coronation processions, reinvented as an expression of mass politics.

In matters of change, street signs changed languages. Prague's squares and roads — always the same actual places — took on over the centuries the names of Habsburgs, Czechs, Slovaks, Germans, Communists, and dissidents. In addition to name changes, various regimes erected and demolished statues and monuments, seeking to bend the irreducible, irrepressible complexity of the city's civic life and urban form to their own inflexible ideologies.

Along with these broad narratives, we learn quite a bit in the way of anecdotes about Prague and its

people over the centuries. For example, Prague's famous night theater and cabaret culture were made possible by widespread and reliable urban lighting. Walking around the city, or "strolling," at one time considered the province of the poor, became by the early 1800s a form of leisure for the middle class, with its own "surprisingly strict rules and customs." This cultural shift was largely enabled by road improvements and the decline of robbery along outlying roads.

Praguers, even many without that much money, frequently had country homes where they sometimes escaped the crowds and noise of the city. (The Communists tolerated this terribly borgeous habit, because they understood fewer people in the city center to mean a lower likelihood of protest or civil unrest breaking out.) Urban renewal targeted the disfavored Jewish Town district; debates over development versus green space occurred centuries ago. The details are unfamiliar and at times confusing, but the broad strokes are ancient.

We also learn about the city's social life and class distinctions. Prague, like most of Europe, was home to much anti-Semitism, and complicating the position of Jews was the fact that Germanness and Jewishness overlapped in Prague, in a way that was rare in Europe. The Czech Karel Zap, in fact, viewed Jews and Germans as "rootless cosmopolitans." (Of course, none of this mattered when the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia).

The jobs open to the working poor in 1800s Prague weren't so different from today's gig economy. They cut and sold ice from frozen rivers, or delivered goods to wealthy households. The same issues of class and ethnicity affect Prague's Vietnamese population today, profiled in the final chapter, especially the "1.5" (born in Vietnam, raised in the Czech Republic) or second generation. They find themselves more Czech than their parents, but not Czech enough for the city's old guard.

At heart, Bryant's project is both humble and vicariously patriotic. It embodies a localism and civic spirit that is not necessarily hostile or indifferent to the nation, or to the city's symbolic meaning, but which sees the city primarily as home rather than symbol. Globalization and nationalism alike will remain a major part of politics, but we can hope that such a groundedness in home might precede them.

ADDISON DEL MASTRO WRITES ON URBANISM AND CULTURAL HISTORY. HE WRITES DAILY AT SUBSTACK.

About Mere Orthodoxy

We are a small group of Christians who since 2005 have been defending word count and nuance on the internet while working out what our faith looks like in public.

Whether it is arts, movies, literature, politics, sexuality, or any other crevice of the human experience, we believe that the Gospel has something to say about it and that "something" really can be good news.

We take our cues from C.S. Lewis and G.K. Chesterton, two of the most thoughtful, perceptive Christians of the twentieth century. One of them wrote Mere Christianity and the other wrote Orthodoxy, and we like those books so much we stapled their names together and took it as our own.

Their thoughtfulness wasn't abstract: it was rooted in the challenges and struggles that England was facing in their time, and their mission was to demonstrate how a classically minded, creedally centered orthodox Christianity was an attractive and persuasive alternative to the ideologies of their day.

And they did their work with words, with essays, poems, and stories.

Here's what we hope you will discover in our writing:

We are scripturally rooted and creedally informed. We know that it's not enough to simply say the Apostle's Creed and that the further we get from it, the more we'll disagree on the particulars of how Christianity should play out in public. But we also think that getting to the Apostle's Creed is a pretty good start for most Christians in our era, so that's where we'll put our baseline.

We're cheerfully contrarian when we have to be. We disagree with each other, and probably with you too (at least on something, right?). We think that's part of what makes life and writing interesting. So we'll make arguments, but hopefully in a way that is generous and kind.

We're eclectic. We could write about anything. Chasing our interests is the only thing that keeps us interesting, and being interesting is the one rule we have. Other publications may have a "niche," and Google loves them for it. Our niche is the world and where our reflections take us in it. And we kind of like it that way (and hope you will too).

We're publicly engaged. We're after the meaning and significance of things, the substance. Which means that we are after matters of public concern. And our hope is that you'll think more carefully, more deeply, and hopefully more Christianly about our world and your place in it after reading us.

THE APOSTLE'S CREED

We believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

We believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.

Amen.

MERE
ORTHODOXY

EST. MMV