

*Religion, Politics, Culture*

# Commonweal

FEBRUARY 2022

## The Image of God

### Art & Idolatry

Jeff Reimer

**PLUS**

**James T. Kloppenberg on**  
Hans Joas's defense  
of the sacred

**Susan McWilliams Barndt on**  
Ross Douthat & the  
mysteries of illness

**Luke Timothy Johnson on**  
his years as a  
Benedictine monk

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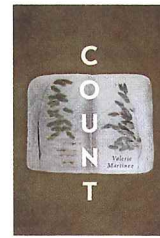
classifications of Caucasian Europeans in the thirteen colonies, while a chapter on class detours into a meditation on Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the psychology of group belonging before quoting from Alexis de Tocqueville. These sections are interesting and informative in their own right, but they nevertheless come across as tangential to the book's main arguments, and they give the text a meandering feel.

Despite buying into some of the unfortunate prejudices of his day, the "Right Reverend New Dealer" John A. Ryan was undoubtedly an accomplished scholar, activist, and priest who contributed immensely to defending the dignity of labor through his academic work, his political efforts, and his religious ministry. Many of his observations about political economy ring just as true today as they did a century ago. He had no patience for academics and other elites who disdained organized labor or sought to portray unions as obsolete, declaring in *A Living Wage* that "in the matter of Unionism...the untutored mind of the workman has gone more straight to the point than economic intelligence misled by a bad method." If he were alive today, he would unfortunately find that little has changed.

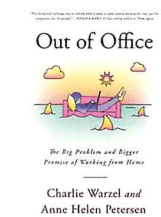
The enduring relevance of Ryan's thought makes him a figure who deserves to be studied much more widely, not only by Catholics but by anyone interested in the history of the American labor movement and the need to revitalize it in the twenty-first century. With *Radical Sufficiency*, Christine Hinze has written an informative and fair-minded introduction to his life and work. Just as important, she has shown how the valuable aspects of his legacy can and should be carried forward by those striving to "greatly, even radically amend the present system." 📖

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## BOOKS IN BRIEF



**COUNT**  
VALERIE MARTINEZ  
University of  
Arizona Press  
\$16.95 | 64 pp.



**OUT OF OFFICE**  
The Big Problem  
and Bigger Promise  
of Working from  
Home  
CHARLIE WARZEL  
AND ANNE HELEN  
PETERSEN  
Knopf  
\$27 | 272 pp.



**FROM SILENCE**  
Finding Calm in a  
Dissonant World  
FRANZ WELSER-MÖST  
Clearview  
\$30 | 184 pp.

**A girl who stands alone** at the shore appears eight times in Valerie Martinez's book-length poem about climate change, *Count*: "During the day, at night / when looking straight on in that highway-drive / hypnotic state." Floods reappear, too, in retellings of indigenous folk tales and in car washes, in the inundations of the climate crisis and in the comfort of splashing in a bathtub as a child. Opposites are drawn together here: the language of legends and contemporary climate science; deserts and tides; reasons to care and the temptations of despair. *Count* is deeply moral, but never moralizing. Reckoning with grief, responsibility, and a deep love of nature, it manages "a delicate balance of beauty— / willows, beaver dams—and warning."

**As Omicron delays yet another round** of return-to-office plans, workers are once again left to question what two years of pandemic-induced remote work have meant to them. While the transition to working from home could be challenging (to say nothing of the essential workers who had no choice but to continue working in person), it also allowed some employees to answer the question, "Is there another way to work?" Journalists Charlie Warzel and Anne Helen Petersen's book-length exploration of that question, *Out of Office*, is less a blueprint for how we might rethink our day-to-day work habits (fewer meetings, greater "flexibility") and more an argument for rethinking the nature of work itself: as one part of a good life, rather than the whole purpose.

**"We can trust in silence**, where depth and fulfillment become possible and where stillness is true beauty." A statement like that carries a lot of weight when it comes from one of the most distinguished conductors in the world. A student of classical music from childhood and director of the Cleveland Orchestra for the past twenty years, Franz Welser-Möst is versed in the intricacies and complexities of sound. His serenely reasoned case for meditateness in the face of so much modern noise grows out of a series of "silences" experienced as a youngster—the death of his sister, his own near-fatal car accident—and is deftly backed by thoughtful, informed reflections on performing classical works in contemporary settings, the importance of music in children's education, and the role his Catholic upbringing played in shaping his creative and spiritual sensibilities.



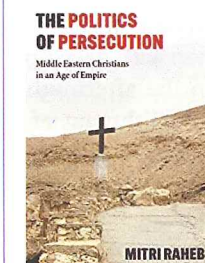
Orthodox Christians before the start of the Eastern and Orthodox Church's Good Friday procession along the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, May 3, 2013

# Fear Is a Bad Teacher

DAVID NEUHAUS

In *The Politics of Persecution*, Mitri Raheb, a Lutheran Palestinian pastor from Bethlehem, makes clear the aim of his thought-provoking book: "Evangelical Christians and Western political forces want to frame the story of Middle Eastern Christians as one simply of persecution. This study clearly demonstrates that the story is one of struggle, resistance, social involvement and resilience." This is the writing of a supposed victim—according to the categories too often imposed by outside observers—who rejects the category of victimhood, insisting that he and his community are resilient actors in the events that unfold in the Middle East today. Raheb is not only a pastor but also the founder of the Diyar Consortium, a group of ecumenically oriented educational and social institutions serving the Bethlehem area. He was elected in 2018 to the Palestinian National Council, which serves as a kind of parliament that represents all Palestinians inside and outside Palestine.

Raheb gives an insider's perspective on Middle Eastern Christians that provides historical context, contemporary



**THE POLITICS OF PERSECUTION**  
Middle Eastern  
Christians in an Age  
of Empire

MITRI RAHEB  
Baylor University Press  
\$24.99 | 215 pp.

analysis, and critical reflection standing in sharp contrast to much of the discourse on Middle Eastern Christians heard in the West. Raheb uncovers the genealogy of much of that discourse, which describes Christians as victims and Muslims as persecutors. As Raheb shows, this way of speaking developed in the wake of the European intervention in the countries of the Ottoman Empire and is intimately tied to European involvement in the region. Raheb convincingly demonstrates how European powers used discourse about Christian persecution to further their own interests, a prefiguring of the discourse and practice of right-wing politicians in the United States in our own time.





At the outset, Raheb points out that “Middle Eastern Christians have often been orientalized, victimized and minoritized.” He seeks to move the focus from persecution to the resilience, resistance, and creativity of Christian communities, which are committed both to their heritage and their homeland. European powers, and later the United States, have presented themselves as protectors of the minorities in the Middle East, which justified their interference in the affairs of the region. Raheb admits that at least some Middle Eastern Christians, including ecclesiastical leaders, welcomed this interference and the privileges it brought them. But his narrative reveals that their enthusiastic embrace of Western involvement was shortsighted.

Raheb shows that the Europeans brought not only modernization, education, and a renaissance of Arabic culture—indeed a blessing for the region—but also Zionism, European-style nationalism, and colonialism, planting the seeds of the ongoing conflicts that have torn the region apart in recent decades. Christian mission schools, set up by various Western Christian denominations throughout the Middle East, educated but also alienated as they instilled an allegiance to the culture and patria of the missionaries, further igniting sectarianism and thus weakening social cohesion. Until the nineteenth century, Islam had “provided the backbone, the glue” that kept the multicultural, pluri-religious Ottoman Empire together. Although non-Muslims did not have equality, they functioned within a flexible and pragmatic administrative structure which provided a large degree of stability and continuity as well as opportunities for prosperity. With the arrival of the European diplomats, merchants, and missionaries, this system was increasingly strained. The European powers imposed themselves as spokespeople for the various minorities, promoting their rights and offering them protection. The prosperity and privileges of these protégés provoked fears among Muslims and their traditional leaders

that their lands were being transformed without their control or consent.

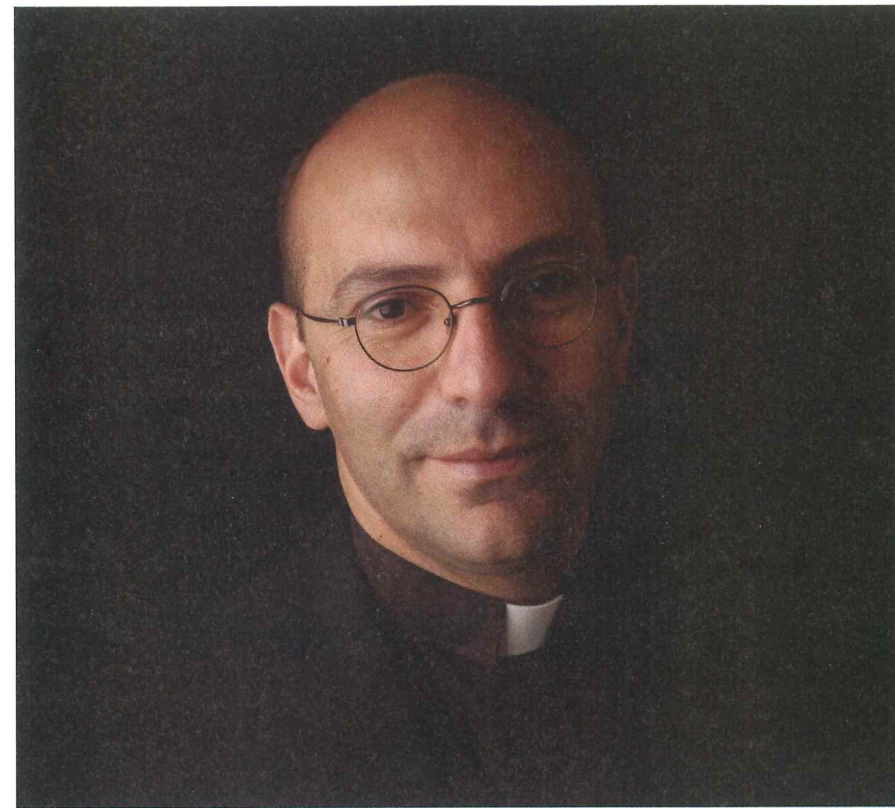
The resulting fragmentation weakened Middle Eastern society. The new order emphasized denominational distinctions between Christian communities in the region (Latins and Protestants), which furthered Christian disunity. But, even more important, it further separated Muslims, Christians, Jews, and other religious sects. Raheb attributes great significance to the 1860 massacres of Christians by Druze in Mount Lebanon, a watershed in the history of intercommunal relations. In the reports diffused in the West by a British diplomat, the Orient was depicted as barbaric: “Islamic, irrational, anti-Christian, and stuck in a primitive mindset.” These massacres seemed to prove that Christians in the region needed special protection, and proffering that protection became a way for the European powers to impose their influence on the region.

The author valiantly attempts to summarize the complex history of how European involvement in the Middle East affected Christians there. He covers the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I, the carving up of the region by the French and the British, the promotion of the Zionist movement by the British, and the mass migrations of European Jews to Palestine. In this period, Christians and Muslims underlined their shared Arab identity to promote identification with developing Arab nationalism. In the aftermath of World War II, the establishment of the state of Israel led to further destabilization, and the Arab regimes fell one after another; the question of Palestine’s status has festered ever since. Arab nationalism produced regimes that were overwhelmingly totalitarian, and many chose to make their homes elsewhere, leading to the mass emigration of Jews and Christians. These regimes often presented themselves as protectors of “minorities,” a position they used to legitimize their rule and to excuse brutality toward opposition, especially from Islamic movements that challenged them.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, the riches raked in from vast oil wealth were ultimately squandered in the wars that have plagued the region. The Middle East was torn asunder in the fighting between Sunni and Shia Muslims, and in the violence resulting from U.S. involvement in the region, almost always done in close collaboration with the Israeli government. Raheb points out that these petrodollars “were used to destroy three ancient civilizations and to displace millions of ordinary people, including nearly two million Christians.” Furthermore, he argues that Christians were not the prime target of supposed Muslim aggression and persecution, but rather the casualties of violence that pitted Muslims against Muslims, often manipulated by forces outside the region: “In the past three decades, Middle Eastern Christians were not active players or the direct targets of oppression, but they paid collateral damage for an intra-Muslim sectarian divide, conflicts over oil, and a hawkish U.S. neoconservative policy.”

Raheb has produced an important document that should be read in the West by all who want to understand Middle Eastern Christians today. The attempt to reduce Christians to the persecuted who need protection says more about the West and its political ambitions in the Middle East than about Middle Eastern Christians themselves:

The concept of persecution has been a tool of public diplomacy and international politics. The pattern throughout is clear: Christians of the Middle East are victims of Islamic persecution. This discourse is part of an orientalist perception that persists in framing the Middle East as a backward, barbaric and intolerant region with long-standing sectarian conflicts: between Christians and Muslims, between Arabs and Jews, and between Sunni and Shia. The fact that the Middle East has, for more than nineteen centuries, been one of the most diverse regions in the world—religiously, ethnically and culturally—is ignored.... All these religious sects and ethnicities were able to coexist, not without challenges, but it was possible for the past fourteen hundred years within the framework of Islam. In most cases, albeit



Mitri Raheb

with a few exceptions, Middle Eastern Islam proved tolerant towards Christians even if it stopped short of granting them full equality.

Raheb’s book is one in a long series of attempts by educated and activist Christians to influence the discourse about their communities in the Middle East. There is a profound sense of frustration that Western policy makers (and the journalists they rely on) are not listening. Headlines scream that “Middle Eastern Christians are disappearing” or “Christians are being driven out,” and wonder about the future of “the cradle of Christianity without Christians.” Those working constantly, courageously, and insistently to make sure that Christian communities in the Middle East remain vibrant oases of life, faith, and hope resist this gloom-and-doom discourse. This frustration is a resounding chord throughout this book. Instead of reflecting on the surprising vibrancy of Christian life in the Middle East or the resilience and

COURTESY OF MITRI RAHEB

tendency toward isolation, withdrawal, and migration. Today, Christians often isolate themselves in their own neighborhoods, institutions, and clubs, and aspire to migrate. Overcoming fear takes Christians out of their self-imposed ghettos to encounter all those within their society who are similarly threatened by the monolithic totalitarian, religious, or ethnocentric visions that threaten the very composition of Middle Eastern society.

One particularly vibrant response to the reality of the Middle East today are the hundreds of Christian schools, universities, hospitals, orphanages, homes for the elderly and the handicapped, and other institutions spread across the region that offer social and educational services. They are characterized by their devoted service to the societies in which they were established and by their openness to one and all. These institutions reveal the face of a Christian presence that seeks to serve not only Christians but the society at large. They represent a very important Christian outreach beyond the hold of fear and isolation. It is through these institutions that Christians can and do leave their mark on society.

Christian institutions at the service of the entire population go hand in hand with the development of an appropriate Christian discourse about the world in which Christians live. Raheb’s book is an excellent contribution to this. It is this discourse that must also distinguish the Christian as a voice for justice, peace, pardon, reconciliation, and selfless love. Fear often provokes the development of a discourse that is reactive and insular, closing Christians off from their neighbors. Those who stay in their ancestral homelands are not the only ones who inspire others by their courage, determination, and faith. There are also those who, like Mitri Raheb, contribute to a conversation that recognizes and strengthens the Christian vocation to be a leaven in society. Their voices need to be heard. ☺

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