

EDITORIAL

IN HIS 1844 ESSAY “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right,’” German philosopher Karl Marx famously described religion as “the opium of the people” and argued that “the abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness.” In his 1927 book *The Future of an Illusion*, Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud also described religion as “the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity” and declared that “the time has probably come . . . for replacing the effects of repression by the results of the rational operation of the intellect.” These arguments clearly reflected a growing tendency towards religious skepticism, and their tremendous influence made it increasingly fashionable in intellectual circles to dismiss religion as either an instrument of social control or a primitive, childlike, and neurotic form of magical thinking. Despite this growing skepticism, however, religion did not simply disappear; on the contrary, it still remains central to the formation of social identities (by uniting groups of people through systems of shared values), political discourses (by justifying certain political positions and policies), and social justice initiatives (by promoting philanthropy and community service). Contemporary critics thus see religion as an oppressive force, such as when it limits individual rights and freedoms, or a liberatory force, such as when it inspires acts of civil disobedience or non-violent resistance.

Our summer issue features a selection of works that explore this theme in various ways. For example, Florence MacDonald’s story “House on Fire” describes a scandal in a small town, as witnessed from a child’s perspective, in order to address larger issues regarding religious repression and reproductive rights. As the young narrator gradually comes to understand the power wielded by the church within her community, she also develops a more adult understanding of her own body as well as the problems facing women in a patriarchal society. Suzannah Windsor’s story “Nativity” similarly focuses on the status of women through the experience of a young minister’s wife who is forced to relocate to a remote town in Australia. The

difficulties she faces while trying to cope with this new environment also cause her to question her feelings about religion and marriage as patriarchal institutions that serve to oppress women. Evelyn Somers' story "Jasmyn Martin, Pillar Saint" is a fantastic tale about a modern woman who assumes the role of an ancient "stylite" or "pillar saint" as a form of social protest. By living, fasting, and praying on a raised column, she effectively co-opts a historically masculine religious practice and uses it to reclaim a certain degree of social power. Marc Jampole's story "The Vision of Saint John" also features a modern protagonist who experiences a series of visions that parallel those of the biblical St. John, as described in the Book of Revelation. While it remains unclear whether these visions are divinely inspired, the story clearly demonstrates the idea of religious feeling as a mystical or anomalous experience that cannot be explained using logic and reason, and it vividly illustrates the protagonist's attempts to come to terms with his own mortality through the dream of transcending the limitations of his physical body. M. W. Miller's story "The Sayings Gospel of Abram" is another fantastic tale that imagines an encounter between the biblical Abraham (née Abram) and the ancient Indian philosopher known as the Buddha in the food court of a Babylonian shopping mall. As they discuss the development of the world's major religions, they also reflect on the ways in which holy scripture is culturally constructed and can be used to justify horrific acts of violence, which prophets are powerless to predict or resist. Finally, Tom Whalen's essay "13 Theological Investigations" provides a survey of various philosophical theories regarding the Christian notion of God. While he does not explicitly endorse any of these theories, his light-hearted investigations attempt to wrestle with the paradoxical idea of God as a human construct that simultaneously eludes human understanding. The fact that his investigations are constantly interrupted by everyday events also serves to contrast the abstract nature of theological speculation with the more concrete concerns of our daily lives.

Our summer issue also features Brittany Kraus' interview with the celebrated Nova Scotian poet and writer David Huebert, who discusses the importance of empathy, environmentalism, and ethics, and it concludes with two new chronicles: Shao-Pin Luo's review of this year's Venice Biennale and Jerry White's review of Quentin Tarantino's new film *Once Upon a Time in . . . Hollywood* (2019).