APRIL 2025 NATIONALREVIEW.COM

NATIONAL REVIEW

A WILD RIDE

Where the Trump administration is taking us

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belief, as the rational assent to a proposition or set of propositions, and *faith*, the "I believe . . ." of the Nicene Creed, that Douthat's treatment occasionally threatens to elide. It is one thing to believe that a preponderance of evidence supports the providential design of the cosmos; it is another to believe in the forgiveness of sins and the life everlasting. The latter is not irrational, but it is not merely rational: it in some sense *exceeds* natural reason, or human reason untouched by grace. That is to say, one may go as far down the path of belief as one likes, indeed as one can, acknowledging all the facts, assenting to every proof and every demonstration, and at the end of it one will remain at an infinite distance from the God of the New Testament. The problem is not primarily that Christianity's tenets are different from those of other world religions; if that were all, then the analogous episodes in other religious systems—world-ending floods, apotheoses of prophets, virgin births—would not unreasonably lead one to conclude that Christianity is one more parallel mythology. What is primarily different about Christianity, indeed singularly different, setting it apart from everything else that might be called "religion," is that it moves in the opposite direction of expectation: not from man to God, whom we reach through the cumulative weight of our propitiations, but from God to man, who is emancipated and freely reconciled by the self-offering of a personal, divine love. Belief is, at the very best, a prolegomenon to faith, the preparatory steps we might take in hopeful anticipation of the gift of faith. But that gift has no predication; it may burst on the adept and the innocent alike. We ought to seek to understand, but we cannot arrive by belief at faith; belief is our gesture of openness to a gift that can come only "like a thief in the night," unannounced and unseen. Faith overturns the economics of understanding. Belief runs to age, but faith to youth. Other religions have the sage, with his ancient visage; the Kingdom of Christ belongs to little children.

Although there is much wisdom to be gained from the great religious traditions—and while we ought, by all means and with all urgency, to pursue the labor of belief, opening the mind and attuning its extraordinary faculties to the reality of spiritual experience—Christianity is, nonetheless, different, not in degree but in kind. It asks a different question, requires a different response. "I have read in Plato and Cicero sayings that are wise and very beautiful," wrote Saint Augustine; "but I have never read in either of them: *Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden.*" The sayings of the philosophers invite belief. The words of Christ invite something that beggars belief. ●

BOOK REVIEW

Witness to Freedom

GEORGE WEIGEL

The Troublemaker: How Jimmy Lai Became a Billionaire, Hong Kong's Greatest Dissident, and China's Most Feared Critic, by Mark L. Clifford (Free Press, 288 pp. $28.99)

Shortly after the October 2023 Synod in Rome, ten Catholic bishops from around the world released a public statement calling for the immediate and unconditional release from prison of Jimmy Lai, the Hong Kong entrepreneur, media executive, and human rights activist. Lai was awaiting a show trial (which continues today) on charges of having violated a draconian "national security" law that was adopted in 2020 and aimed at crushing what was left of Hong Kong's prodemocracy movement. At the time of the bishops' appeal, Lai had been imprisoned in solitary confinement for almost 1,000 days, and the prelates were polite but firm: "There is no place for such cruelty and oppression in a territory that claims to uphold the rule of law and respect the right to freedom of expression."

The over-the-top response from the Hong Kong authorities and their local media mouthpieces to this plea for decency was grossly out of proportion to the bishops' request, and all the more telling for that.

The government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) reacted with a tirade that would have done Dr. Goebbels proud, back in the day: "The HKSAR Government firmly rejects and strongly disapproves of the fact-twisting remarks made by foreign Catholic leaders to inappropriately interfere in the HKSAR's internal affairs and the HKSAR courts' independent exercise of judicial power. Any person, regardless of his or her identity, who attempts to interfere with the judicial proceedings in the HKSAR in order to procure a defendant's evasion of the criminal justice process is blatantly undermining the rule of law of the HKSAR."

HKSAR's oxymoronic "secretary for justice," Paul Lam Ting-kwok, piled on, claiming that the bishops' statement was "absolutely unacceptable in principle," and warned that anyone making a statement such as the bishops' was perverting the course of justice and risked being charged with criminal contempt of court.

Ronny Tong, a regime-friendly commentator in the *South China Morning Post*, deployed a singular reading of Exodus 23:1–3 and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to denounce the bishops for "bearing false witness" in an act of "rash judgment" that rendered the bishops "guilty of [the sins of] detraction . . . [and] calumny." The *SCMP*'s editors saw fit to place this headline on Mr. Tong's screed: "Catholic leaders' petition to free Jimmy Lai shows politics and religion do not mix."

Such rodomontade (as WFB might have put it) invites questions: What is it about Lai that so frightens the Hong Kong authorities and their masters in Beijing? Why would they go out of their way to give further attention to a statement in Lai's behalf from Catholic bishops who have no political power whatsoever: bishops whose petition did not even move the Vatican to join its voice to theirs in public defense of Catholicism's most ▶

famous political prisoner? Why the affronted hyperbole?

Mark Clifford, a longtime friend and business associate of Jimmy Lai's and a veteran journalist and businessman with extensive Hong Kong experience, suggests the answer in *The Troublemaker*. There Clifford traces the arc of a remarkable life in which a dirt-poor refugee, illegal immigrant, and child laborer shows himself an entrepreneurial and marketing genius, builds two business empires, experiences a profound religious conversion—and then risks everything to defend the freedom of the city to which he believes he owes so much.

Lai terrifies the powers that be in Beijing and their satraps in Hong Kong because he embodies an alternative Chinese future to that envisioned by Xi Jinping: a China that is both prosperous and free; a China in which material wealth is complemented by spiritual depth; a China that trades freely with the world while helping other countries develop economically, rather than a China seeking global hegemony as an antidote to its memories of historical humiliation.

The Troublemaker is also a detailed, and depressing, account of how the Beijing regime, with no serious pushback from either Western governments or Western businesses, has systematically dismantled the guarantees about the rule of law to which it committed itself when the United Kingdom returned sovereignty over Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China in 1997. Time and again, the people of Hong Kong demonstrated their determination to protect their civil and political liberties, a cause in which Lai became prominent, first as a philanthropic supporter, then as a publisher and editor, and finally as the embodiment of the movement for Hong Kong's freedom. Time and again, those liberties were whittled away, with no serious protest from the West, until the 2020 national security law put paid to the "one country, two systems" formula agreed to in 1997. Now, Hong Kong's economic vibrancy is threatened by a Beijing hegemon that has taken the dark arts of technologically enforced social control to new levels in the PRC and is determined to do the same in Hong Kong.

Jimmy Lai is my friend, and so I'm perhaps a suspect witness in his case. But it's precisely as a friend that I appreciate the care with which Clifford sheds light on so many different aspects of Jimmy's achievement. Having met him long after his days as a global innovator and leader in the apparel industry, I was fascinated to learn how a boy who used to sleep on tables in the factory where he first worked developed the imagination, self-discipline, and entrepreneurial skills that would eventually make him a billionaire. Having experienced his robust, energetic personality, I was happy to learn from Clifford about Jimmy's voracious reading habits, which suggested a more contemplative side to a man of action in the worlds of business, media, and politics.

Most of all, however, I appreciated how surely (and without pietistic sugarcoating) *The Troublemaker* demonstrates how Jimmy Lai's Catholicism, to which he was brought by his heroic wife, Teresa, has sustained him in his struggle to defend Hong Kong's liberties against overwhelming odds. Jimmy Lai was a man of tremendous vitality before he met Teresa Li in 1989 and was, on Clifford's telling, "smitten by this young reporter 16 years his junior." But it was not only Teresa's multilingual intelligence and beauty that led the "brash and boisterous" Jimmy, a man "as quick to weep as to shout," to court her and then to marry her in 1991; it was, as Clifford continues, that Teresa was "controlled and poised, centered above all by her Catholic faith."

Clifford describes with sensitivity Lai's complex journey from agnostic to questioner to passionate Catholic witness, bringing into that story a diverse cast of characters that includes *Time*'s David Aikman, the *Wall Street Journal*'s William McGurn, economist and China missionary Audrey Donnithorne, and the redoubtable Cardinal Joseph Zen, now bishop emeritus of Hong Kong. But it was Teresa's example, above all, that nurtured Lai in his Catholic faith, which is now the rock-solid foundation on which his resistance to tyranny rests. In over three years of solitary confinement in prison, Jimmy has become an amateur Christian artist, using colored pencils to sketch various Christian tableaux on lined paper of the sort one remembers from elementary school. Two of those drawings are among my most cherished possessions: one is a crucifixion scene, the other a portrait of the Virgin Mary at the Annunciation. The latter, in addition to the inscription "Jimmy Lai, 27/7/2022, Stanley Prison, Hong Kong," includes a bold "YES!"—Jimmy's translation of Mary's *fiat* in Luke 1:38. That "Yes" perfectly sums up Jimmy Lai's embrace of his vocation as a witness to our God-given freedom.

The Hong King authorities have done everything possible to humiliate, and then break, this now 77-year-old man, who could have fled Hong Kong and lived comfortably anywhere in the world: Jimmy is brought to his trial in chains, with an escort of screaming police cars—a scenario not quite as grotesquely cruel as the hurdles on which the English martyrs were dragged to Tyburn Hill in the days of Henry VIII, but deliberately dehumanizing in the same way. The paradox, however, is that this deliberate degradation has made Jimmy Lai stronger: "He is living in complete freedom," Teresa told Clifford, who complements that affirmation with his own: Jimmy "has a clear goal: maintain his innocence and continue to resist his captors with dignity and honor. He knows what he is doing. Behind bars since the last day of 2020, now with his prison window boarded up, he has been purified by the experience, approaching it as a spiritual quest and a test of his faith."

In persecuting Jimmy Lai, China is telling the world important things the world needs to know about what Clifford aptly limns as "the cruelty and barbarity of the Chinese communist system." In telling Jimmy Lai's story with both honesty and admiration, Mark Clifford has not only done his friend a great service; he has offered a warning about the character of a regime to which far too many are eager to kowtow. ●