

faith & freedom

Reforming the Church's Social and Political Witness

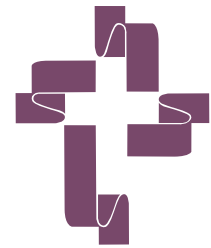
Fall 2012

Election 2012: Republicans and Democrats Pray



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Will Churches Defend Free Speech?

After the attacks on the U.S. embassies in Egypt and Libya, and especially the murders in Libya, will the Religious Left defend free speech or align with demands that Islam's critics be silenced?

Some U.S. religionists seem angrier over the anti-Islamic video that supposedly provoked Islamist mobs than over the attacks themselves. Already fortified by two decades or more of multiculturalism, 9/11 only amplified the Religious Left's zeal for accommodation of every variant of Islam. Radical Islam, with its fierce intolerance for the sexually liberated and free thinkers, not to mention empowered women, should terrify liberal religionists in the West. But the Religious Left has fairly studiously avoided direct critique even of Taliban-style theology, preferring to vaguely disparage religious extremism.

The implication is sometimes that zealous Christians in America are as threatening as al Qaeda. In fact, the Religious Left always has fired most of its rhetorical salvos at conservative Christians, who are deemed the main obstacle to the Religious Left's cultural and sexual agenda. Never mind that ardent Muslims, with widespread support even in moderate Muslim societies, favor capital punishment for sexual malefactors and religious dissenters. The Religious Left, despite its global rhetoric, was always more concerned about domestic politics than human rights for anybody in Iran or Saudi Arabia.

And it has always been a source of pride among liberal religionists that they are supposedly more attuned to the sensitivities of other religions, primarily Islam, than are more provincial conservative Christians. Recently the head of Southern Methodist University's seminary carefully explained the latest situation.

"American Muslims understand that built into the fabric of their religious convictions is the tenet that representing the Prophet Muhammad in any way would be abhorrent," said William Lawrence, dean of United Methodism's Perkins School of Theology in Dallas. "Conversely, American Christians are very familiar and quite comfortable with depictions of Jesus dying on the cross. But it's not the role of American Christians to tell others what the tenets of their religion should be simply because they don't recognize them in their own religious traditions. So this should prompt an important discussion about why such a tenet is significant in Islam."

Should Muslims be able to ban depictions of Muhammad through civil law or intimidation? Lawrence didn't say. Instead he continued: "In our society we have a very high level of commitment to freedom of speech, including the freedom to say something utterly reprehensible. But in many other parts of the world, that freedom isn't constitutionally assured. In those societies, the actions of the U.S. film producers [behind 'Innocence of Muslims'] just wouldn't be tolerated."


True enough, but does the United Methodist seminary dean have any preference for either perspective, i.e., free speech versus

blasphemy laws? If so, he demurred. Instead, Lawrence concluded in neutral terms: "It has been interesting to see the U.S. Secretary of State and President Obama—as well as political leaders in Yemen, Egypt and Libya, whose political systems are still in development—condemn the content of the film while at the same time condemning the violence that has erupted over it. And it is encouraging to see the leaders of those countries say that the people of the United States aren't to blame over the work of one person."

Should we be "encouraged" that majority Muslim societies still generate rage, however contrived or exploited, over an obscure video? Lawrence evidently discerns common ground between Muslim Arabs and Americans leaders who equally denounce murder and the production of low quality films.

More specific than the United Methodist seminary dean was liberal Baptist clergy Welton Gaddy of the Interfaith Alliance, which was founded in the 1990s primarily to combat the Religious Right. Writing for the *Washington Post*, he lamented "anti-Muslim bigotry that has become all too pervasive in the United States," adding: "We saw what hate brought on Sept. 11, 2001, and we saw what hate looked like when Terry Jones threatened to burn a Koran last year," as though destroying a holy book were morally on par with mass murder. He concluded: "We will do well to intensify our efforts to promote respect for religious freedom and strive for interreligious understanding every day, which will help create a new context for the inevitable misstatement or offensive remark that provides a framework within which the wrong quickly can be resolved."

But does "religious freedom" for Gaddy and others on the Religious Left include the right, as guaranteed in America's Constitution, to attack Islam through film or publicity stunts? Of course Americans have long endured a media and arts culture that routinely mocks Christianity. Should only attacks on Islam merit special regard and protection?

Should critics of Islam, whether thoughtful or stupid, have full freedom of religion and expression? Enmeshed by radical multiculturalism and intimidated by violent overseas mobs as well as by domestic politics, the Religious Left, among others, seems increasingly ambivalent about these rights. 

Mark Tooley



Mark D. Tooley is the President of the Institute on Religion & Democracy and the Director of UMAction.

Church News

FRC Head Talks Free Speech and Religious Liberty

Family Research Council head Tony Perkins warned that Christians face increased demonization because of their orthodox convictions. In his address before a National Press Club luncheon on September 12 in Washington, D.C., Perkins warned, "It's a clear attempt to silence, and what that will do is short-circuit our [U.S. political] process and will lead to acts of violence like what we saw at the Family Research Council."

Perkins further observed, "In our system of government we all come to the table and we work through and arrive at consensus.... So you come to that table with some value construct. Mine, and historically this country, has come to the table with a Judeo-Christian worldview." He declared, "We make no apologies for being a part of the process and shaping policies that would be influenced by that worldview. Someone's values are going to be reflected in the policies we adopt." 📷

Quakers Divest from Israel

On September 25, the Quaker Friends Fiduciary Corporation (FFC) decided to divest from Hewlett-Packard (HP) and Veolia Environment. Both companies do business with Israel. FFC has in-

McLaren Leads Same-Sex Commitment Ceremony for Son

The New York Times reported that Brian McLaren "led a commitment ceremony with traditional Christian elements" following his son Trevor's same-sex marriage to Owen Patrick Ryan. Executive director of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee and Universal Life minister Guy Cecil officiated the September 22 wedding in the couple's apartment.

The elder McLaren formerly led Cedar Ridge Community Church, has authored several well-known books, and shines as the guiding light for Emergent Christians everywhere. Many church members have been surprised by this development. Since around 2006 at least, McLaren has been calling upon Christians to cease condemning homosexuality in favor of dialogue and outreach. 📷



BRIAN MCLAREN seen at the 2011 Wild Goose Festival in North Carolina, has discussed the "joy of paying taxes" and lamented the lack of global environmental regulation. (Photo: The Institute on Religion and Democracy)

vestments reaching \$250,000 in HP and \$140,000 in Veolia.

According to divestment advocates, HP provided technology consulting to the Israeli Navy while Veolia was convicted for "environmental and social concerns." In a press release, the U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation shared that they were "thrilled" with this development. The divestment apologists asserted that HP "maintains a biometric ID system used in Israeli checkpoints for racial profiling; manages the Israeli Navy's IT

infrastructure; and supplies the Israeli army with other equipment and services used to maintain its military occupation." Veolia helps maintain "a light rail linking illegal Israeli settlements with cities in Israel; it operates segregated bus lines through the occupied West Bank; and it operates a landfill and a waste water system that dumps Israeli waste on Palestinian land." 📷



RICHARD LAND (right), president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention confers with Mark Tooley, president of The Institute on Religion and Democracy. (Photo: The Institute on Religion and Democracy)

Dr. Richard Land on Faith and Government in the 2012 Election

In a September 20 segment on the Odyssey Network, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention Dr. Richard Land commented on the role of government and what the 2012 presidential election means for people of faith. "I think that this election, more than most elections in our history, is about big issues," Dr. Land noted. "It's not going to be an election about whether you like Romney or you like Obama. The big issue is the role of the federal government in American peoples' lives on a daily and weekly basis for the next generation."

Dr. Land hoped Christians who would vote for larger government in order to help the poor would "reexamine what the Bible says about human nature." He urged, "If human nature is what the Bible says it is, socialism and radical redistribution of income will never work. People are not going to work according to their ability and receive according to their need. It's contrary to what the Bible says human nature is." 📷

(Photo: Blogspot)



Good News for Persecuted Christians

by Faith J. H. McDonnell

Working in advocacy for the persecuted Church around the world, one hears bad news far more often than good. But there was good news from both Iran and Pakistan on Saturday, September 8, 2012.

Iranian Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani has been acquitted and freed from prison where he had been held for 1062 days because of his Christian faith and witness. Just prior to his release, activists coordinated by the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) in a “Tweet for Youcef” campaign were reaching more than 3 million Twitter followers a day!

The persecution of Christians by the Iranian Islamic regime has been going on for years, and even with this unprecedented acquittal, there is still danger for Youcef and his family. Many who have followed his case are strongly urging asylum in the West for the Nadarkhanis. In any case, pray for God’s protection for them.

Meanwhile, more than 1200 miles away, another miracle had already taken place. Rimsha Masih, the young Pakistani Christian girl accused under Pakistan’s draconian blasphemy law, was released on bail from the jail where she has been since August 17, 2012. Rimsha, who has been identified as being 14 years old but with a lower mental age and possibly having Down syndrome, was falsely accused of burning pages of Islamic material. Now one of her accusers, a Muslim cleric named Khalid Jadoon, has himself been accused of planting false evidence in order to stir up hatred against the Christian community and of blasphemy himself for desecrating Koranic materials in order to frame Rimsha.

Like Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani, Rimsha is free but not safe. Even if all the charges against her are dropped, the Islamist mobs that originally attacked her, her family, and the entire Christian com-

munity where she lived, will not be satisfied. There is rage because she has been released, rage because Jadoon has been arrested, and rage just because Christians even exist. Other Christians who have been accused of blasphemy have been killed by vigilantes before trial or while in prison. Others have had to flee the country permanently.

Just the existence of these laws, included in Pakistan’s Penal Code, squashes free speech and religious freedom and ensures a life of misery and persecution for Christians and other religious minorities. The government of Pakistan needs to deal with those who make the initial accusations, the religious clerics and others who foment riots, and the resulting mobs that carry out the violence.

From the moment the accusation of burning pages of the Noorani Qaida, a booklet used to learn the basics of the Koran, was made against Rimsha, the mob mentality kicked in. According to the Barnabas Fund, “the alleged incident was broadcast over the loudspeakers of the mosques in the area.” Barnabas Fund reported that enraged Muslims severely beat the little girl and members of her family, and torched the houses of two Christian families.

Most of the Christians in the area had to flee their homes and hide in the woods, since what passed for Friday prayers at the mosques was a pep talk against Christians by the imams. It ended with Muslims taking an oath to drive the Christians out of the area. Barnabas Fund reveals that Muslim shopkeepers vowed not to sell food and other essentials to Christians and that Muslim landlords would end tenancy agreements with them.

Rimsha was arrested under Section 295-B of Pakistan’s Penal Code which stipulates that desecration of the Koran

must be punished with life in prison. Christians and Muslims alike have been accused of blasphemy over land or other property disputes, business matters, and any kind of personal grudges. Christians in particular have been targeted for refusing attempts to force them to renounce their faith and convert to Islam, for protesting against the rape of their daughters (or sons), or for having the temerity to want to eat ice cream out of the same bowls used by Muslims.

With her face completely covered, Rimsha upon release was escorted by heavily armed guards from an armored personnel carrier to a Pakistan military helicopter. She was then flown to an undisclosed location to be reunited with her family, which had already been sequestered for their protection. *Asia News* was able to obtain an interview with the Masih family from their safe house and reported that they were overjoyed that Rimsha was coming home.

The fate of Rimsha Masih’s family, like that of the Nadarkhanis, is uncertain. The safest alternative in a climate where Islamists see justification for destroying an entire Christian neighborhood, not just the life of one individual or family, because of delusional perceived offenses against their religion, is to **get out**. Some reports, including a Compass Direct interview with one of Rimsha’s attorneys, have said that there are no plans to send them abroad. But asylum in the West may be the only way to ensure their survival. 📍



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The Core Problem Facing PCUSA

by Barton J. Gingerich

On the last day of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A.'s 220th General Assembly in July, one of that church's core problems reared its ugly head. The plenary assembly in Pittsburgh began a discussion regarding the constitution. Part I of the PCUSA's constitution is the *Book of Confessions* while Part II is the *Book of Order*. The controversy pivoted on Part I's relation to the constitution and its authority, especially with regard to redefining marriage.

One gutsy commissioner petitioned the Moderator to rule as out-of-order a recommendation to redefine marriage away from one man and one woman. The commissioner noted that this recommendation was in conflict with the church's *Book of Confessions*, which is part one of the church's constitution, in at least three places—the Helvetic Confession, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Confession of 1967, all of which say that marriage is between a man and a woman.

As shocked whispers rumbled through the auditorium, Paul Hooker of the Advisory Committee on the Constitution explained: "The *Confessions* are deliberately broad and allow us to draw different ecclesiological conclusions on the basis of our theology."

One commissioner responded: "Today, the motion is related to the *Book of Confessions*. I, as a Christian, for whom Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior, have been instructed to be guided by the *Confessions* and to be obedient to the polity of the Church. Surely what is said repeatedly in the *Book of Confessions* is of more weight to our charter from Jesus Christ (to use Roberts' language) than in the trust clause which is in the form of government." Another contended, "While there are minor variations in the *Book of Confessions*, there are no variations on this subject. It speaks uniformly on its understanding of marriage."

One young lady festooned in a rainbow stole quipped the *Confessions* would preclude her ordination as a female. Another warned: "Many years ago, in the 1920s, there was a famous sermon

preached, called 'Shall the Fundamentalists Win.' To me, a fundamentalist reading of the *Book of Confessions* wants to make it a totally unified set of rules, but as it was interpreted for us, it is a multi-century application and exposition of what Scripture teaches us to believe in..."



PRESBYTERIAN FOUNDER John Knox reproves Mary, Queen of Scots. (Photo: Mylearning)

Finally, it came down to a vote. Seventy percent supported the chair's decision to allow for contradiction with the *Book of Confessions*. Fortunately, the effort to redefine marriage failed for other reasons.

Let's back up and look at what the confessions were all about. Calvinism—like Lutheranism—is an incredibly confessional faith tradition. It had to find a way to protest the Roman Catholic Church's claims and teachings while not descending into chaos, anarchy, and heresy. As the reformers began to interpret the Scriptures differently from the Roman hierarchy, they also realized they needed to somehow keep within the historic Christian faith and its teachings (perhaps narrowly or locally defined). The Presbyterians and their Continental Calvinist cousins (all of whose confessions are included in Part I of the PCUSA constitution) had to prove they could reject a pope and bishops—all without damning one's soul or bringing the Church to naught. Thus, the Reformed elders reasoned out their faith in the confessions, by which they would keep themselves accountable. Now, different scholars fight over what this all means, especially with regard to Scripture. The overwhelming consensus of old Reformed thinkers was that the confessions derive any teaching authority from the Bible: they are merely Scripture applied to specific beliefs as contrasted

with other differing theologies. Reformed thinkers are all about *sola Scriptura*...or at least they were in a clearer day.

The histories are filled with stories of bold Calvinists who would not renounce the confession in the face of threats, tortures, and even death. The Presbyterians were especially notable for their fierce theological convictions and fiery opposition to anything that smacked of "popery." This, of course, included even the Anglican Church and thus presents an entertaining portion of British religious history. More importantly, it points to a very key concept: If you aren't confessional, you aren't Presbyterian. And it wasn't because they thought "it was a good idea at the time." They held their biblical beliefs to be eternal truths.

So why the ho-hum attitude of the revisionist delegates? I'm sure no one reason will suffice. They don't agree with the faith of their fathers—that much is clear. They obviously don't like rules being enforced when they are breaking said rules. Most if not all are universalists: what G.K. Chesterton described as reverse or "soft" Calvinists, where no one has free will and everyone is predestined for heaven. Therefore, church discipline as well as the soteriological emphases in the confessions upset their progressive sensibilities. Likewise, those icky absolutist creeds and confessions are merely historical niceties in an antiquarian performance that gives depth to the social club and morally superior political advocacy group called "church."

Here is the fulcrum point from which spring rampant pansexuality, progressive partisan politics, and radical feminism. Dealing with those theological particulars, I imagine, would soon separate the sheep from the goats. 🐐



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'Womanist' Theologian at UM Seminary

by Julia Polese

The Emergent Village's recently released podcast from the "Conversation on Process Theology" features one of United Methodist Claremont School of Theology's numerous process theologians, Monica A. Coleman. As the resident "Womanist" theology professor, Coleman focuses on the "intersectionality" between race, gender, and class in Process Theology, specifically from the point of view of black women. Session 5 of the conference held at Claremont early this year was meant to outline "Construction for Ministry," or ways to use Process Theology pastorally.

Process Theology asserts that God is constantly evolving. Womanist Theology is feminist theology for black women. Claremont seminary in California is one of United Methodism's 13 official seminaries.

Coleman, who studies African traditional religion in addition to Womanist Theology, began her "conversation" with a brief outline of how she came to Process Theology through "the activism to which [she] feel[s] called." She claimed that Process Theology addressed theodicy—the problem of evil—better than orthodox theologies. "You can be a 'down with the people' person," but it's harder to hold on to "orthodox theologies that don't work in a post-modern context." Furthermore, she found traditional Liberation and feminist theologies lacking because they did not address the unique experiences of black women. Feminist theology is about "white women with money" and Liberation Theology only addressed men. Thus, looking at her experience, she felt the need to build a "Womanist" theology to match it.

Because Process thought is empirical—based on stories, narratives, and experiences, rather than an outside authority—she claims, "We don't try to convince ourselves we're not seeing what

we're seeing." Citing experiences she had in church growing up, Coleman said Process Theology does not say to the suffering Christian "God is teaching you."



MONICA A. COLEMAN is an Associate Professor at Claremont School of Theology.
(Photo: Wikipedia)

Instead, because it is empirical, pastorally she should say, "There's no lesson in [suffering], that just sucks."

Continuing along this line, Coleman urged people to "change their theology" instead of changing what they thought. "It's healthy to make God look like you," she said. "It's a good self-esteem move." This Womanist Theology necessarily questions many orthodox assumptions. She says that while Womanist Theology is different from feminist theology, they beg some similar questions: "Should we have a male God? Can a male savior save us?" However, Womanist Theology can take it a different direction. We should learn to see suffering and teaching normally attached to Christ in black women.

Another theme in Coleman's talk was a lack of concern for the afterlife: "We don't really do devils, per se. You make enough bad decisions you'll have hell right on earth. We don't need to send you anywhere." Later, when citing a rote phrase she found offensive, she said "it's a lie from the pit of non-hell." Furthermore, during the question and answer session (which, Emergent Village writes, is meant to be "a time to question, disagree, and push-back"), Coleman addressed the question regarding her "lack of interest in heaven." She explained that she has a "this-world eschatology" and then went on to comment on the role of ancestors in Womanist Process Theology. Invoking what she called "subjective mortality," she claimed that ancestors may be dead, but it doesn't mean "you still don't come to your grandchildren in their dreams.... Many Christians call that the Holy Ghost. I call it an ancestor. I don't think metaphysically it's any different."

Coleman's "this-world eschatology" colored many other claims she made. When considering the problem of evil, she wondered why oppression of different races, classes, and sexual orientations exists if God wants us to be free. She indicated her disregard of final justice and reward in favor of justice now, saying the explanation that "we're all really, really sinning except rich people" is one that Womanist Liberation Process Theology combats, disregarding that no orthodox theologian claims blessing in this life indicates holiness or being right before God. 📖



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Episcopal Bishop Denies Biblical Authority

by Kristin L. Rudolph

Christians on either side of the homosexuality debate have “a lot to agree on... [but] one of the things we might not agree on is that book... the Bible,” said Bishop Gene Robinson at Skyline Church’s “Conversation on the Definition of Marriage.”

On Sunday, July 28, 2012, San Diego’s Skyline Church invited Robinson (the first openly gay bishop ordained in the Episcopal Church), John Corvino, Jennifer Roback Morse, and Robert Gagnon for this discussion. Robinson, the retiring bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire, and Corvino, co-author of *Debating Same-Sex Marriage*, defended homosexual unions. Morse, founder and president of The Ruth Institute, and Gagnon, a theologian at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, defended traditional marriage.

“The Church is trying to ask and answer the question, how big... is God’s love for all of God’s children,” Robinson said, explaining that differing views of the Bible are a large reason for “why we miss each other in these conversations.” According to the Bishop: “The Bible is words about God [but] they were words not dictated by God... all of those words were meant to point to the living reality of a living God.”

Robinson explained his view on the Scriptures. “I take the Bible unbelievably seriously,” he stressed. “I take it so seriously that I refuse to take it simply.” According to Robinson, “context means everything,” and when reading Scripture, one should ask: “Is the context described there similar to our context and therefore is eternally binding?” Through this contextualization, he discounted scriptural prohibitions of homosexuality, arguing that Jesus’ promise in John 16:13 that the Holy Spirit would “guide you into all truth” means that Christians’ views on sexual ethics should evolve.

With his highly selective view of Scripture, Robinson admitted it is “a very tough



JIM GARLOW, pastor of Skyline Church, moderated the discussion. (Photo: Skyline Church)

call” to determine whether “the little voice I hear in my brain is God’s voice or my ego doing a magnificent impression of God’s voice.” He insisted: “We’re not challenging the definition of marriage... we just want to be let into that institution.” Robinson then compared legalizing same-sex marriage with opening marriage to African Americans after the Civil War and overturning anti-miscegenation laws in the Civil Rights era. He closed by saying: “For years you have criticized us for being promiscuous and shallow. And now that we want to participate in the fidelity and lifelong commitment of marriage, how very sad to try to shut us out.”

Robert Gagnon, one of the top scholars on homosexuality and the Bible, refuted Robinson’s claims and outlined the biblical definition of marriage. He cited Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 19:3–10 where he prohibited divorce on the basis of the natural order God established (Gen. 1:27, 2:24) by creating male and female. For Jesus, “The twoness of the sexes... becomes the foundation for the twoness of the sexual bond thus prescribing marital monogamy and marital insolubility.”

Gagnon explained that “God intended, from the beginning, for sexual unions to be binary.” Polygamy was allowed in the Old Testament due to “human hardness of heart,” but Jesus “closed that loophole on the basis of the Creation text,” the Presbyterian theologian said.

Gagnon noted that in Creation God established “a male [and] female requirement

for all sexual unions, on the basis of which other sexual principles can then be established.” Consequently, “since the foundation is more important than the superstructure built on the foundation, it would follow that for Jesus, a homosexual relationship is worse than a polygamous one.”

Refuting the claim that same-sex marriage would not redefine the institution, Gagnon argued: “If the male/female requirement is foundational for marriage from Creation on, on the basis of which other principles can then be extrapolated, then we have to say, yes indeed, we are right at the core affecting the definition of marriage.” He then emphasized that “sexual ethics for Jesus is a life and death matter... Jesus coupled a heightened ethical demand on the one hand with also an aggressive outreach of love to the biggest violators of that demand.” Jesus’ intention is not to condemn sinners to hell, or to give them a free pass on sexual ethics, but rather to “reclaim them for the Kingdom.”

To Gagnon and others who affirm a traditional understanding of Scripture, blessing homosexual relationships is by no means “loving,” but a dangerous redefinition of Christian love. True biblical love desires what is best for the beloved, namely, eternal life through Christ. When Jesus told the woman caught in adultery: “Neither do I condemn you,” he also commanded her to “go and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11). With eternal life at stake, it is perilous to abandon a firm foundation of historic Judaic and Christian teaching found in the Bible for an “evolving” interpretation that relies heavily on our own fallen intuition. 🏳️



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Paul Ryan and the Catholic Divide

by Kieran Raval



VP CANDIDATE Paul Ryan's use of Catholic Social Teaching was cause for controversy earlier this year. (Photo: Crisis Magazine)

Paul Ryan's appointment to the 2012 Republican presidential ticket has reignited a firestorm over the congressman's Catholicity that is reflective of an emerging divide in the Catholic Church in America. The Ryan debacle started in April when he was chastised by 90 Georgetown University professors, led by Fr. Thomas Reese, S.J., for "profoundly misreading Church teaching." It was then the bus-riding-nuns' turn to play magisterium and critique his policies by calling into question his Catholic faith. This, of course, had the effect of taking any legitimate critique that may have originally existed and burying it beneath a lot of conscious evolution and new age feminism masquerading as Christianity. The issue went dormant for a few months but has now resurfaced in a big way.

Many, including the activist Catholic Left, have a very limited vision of Catholic Social Teaching that is a convenient fit for a particular political philosophy. Not all political issues are created equal, at least from the Church's point of view. Yet, a clear attempt is being made by the Catholic Left to draw a moral equivalence between issues like abortion and the budget. This is because many apologists of the Catholic Left realize their political persuasions are incompatible with the Church's clear, and consistent teaching on certain key moral issues that have important implications in the public sphere.

In a 2004 letter, then-Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger wrote, "Not all moral issues have the same moral weight as abortion and euthanasia." Today we might add to that list the issues of marriage and the freedom of the Church (what many would call "religious liberty" issues). Indeed, in a recent column, Ryan's own bishop, Robert Morlino, says: "Some of the most fundamental issues for the formation of a Catholic conscience are as follows: sacredness of human life from conception to natural

death, marriage, religious freedom and freedom of conscience, and a right to private property."

The reality is that Catholic Social Teaching inherently contains a hierarchy of issues. If the society's most innocent and vulnerable citizens are legally murdered on the order of 1 million per year, or if the basic foundations of society, natural marriage and the family, are subject to activist revision, then other social issues will matter little. Furthermore, beyond the somewhat more-utilitarian question of the importance of these issues for the health of society, there is the more essential question of how one's political positions affect one's soul. Before trying to guide any social outcomes, the Church is most concerned with this point.

The criterion for evaluating the morality of supporting a particular position on a social or political issue is whether the position involves an intrinsic moral evil. Thankfully, the Church offers a way forward on these social and political issues that do not hold the moral weight of involving intrinsic moral evil, but are very important. Catholic Social Teaching lays out principles like the preferential option for the poor. But the Church does not prescribe specific policies as to how best to help the poor, which is generally the domain of the laity, who are to be informed by the principles of Catholic Social Teaching and guided by the virtue of prudence. There is much room for reasonable debate and disagreement, even among faithful Catholics. This is because the Church does not prescribe specific social policies.

At least, that should be the case, if one is operating within an ecclesiology (that is, an understanding of the Church) that is in keeping with the Church's understanding of herself. Here, Bishop Morlino was very clear in his article. It is not

for the bishops to be crafting social policy, as if they were policy consultants, or as if the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) were a think tank. There's a problem in ecclesiology, for example, in Bishop Stephen Blaire's comments that the Ryan budget "fails to meet moral criteria." He spoke as chairman of the USCCB's Committee on Justice, Peace, and Human Development. This was taken as some kind of official ecclesiastical pronouncement against Ryan by the likes of the Georgetown 90 and the nuns on the bus. But it wasn't.

The USCCB, as an episcopal conference, has virtually no teaching authority according to canon law. Cardinal Ratzinger has confirmed this: "No episcopal conference, as such, has a teaching mission: its documents have no weight of their own save that of the consent given to them by the individual bishops." The teaching authority of the Church is exercised by individual bishops, in union with Rome. Bishop Blaire's statements about the budget have no weight canonically and make no demands on the faithful.

A more careful posture by the bishops will protect them from service to a partisan political agenda, helping them to be a credible voice for the teachings of Jesus Christ. We may then even be able to re-discover an authentic hermeneutic for Catholic Social Teaching. ■



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God Among Republicans and Democrats

by Mark D. Tooley

Performing damage control, Democratic faith outreach director the Rev. Derrick Harkins boasted that God was mentioned 30 times during one evening at the Democratic Convention. But the furor was too much, and after God had been removed from the party's platform, He was abruptly restored Wednesday night. Reportedly the instruction came from on high, meaning the White House.

Along with recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, God was gavelled back into the platform after a dubious voice vote that included some boos from delegates. Wielding the gavel for God, perhaps appropriately, was former Ohio Governor Ted Strickland, himself an ordained United Methodist minister who attended an evangelical Methodist seminary.

So God had returned. But Rev. Harkins, who presided over early morning daily prayer gatherings at the convention, was largely right. God had never really left, at least rhetorically. For all the big talk about secular, post-Christian Ameri-

ca, religion and God talk remain about as big as ever in American politics.

Some of the best God talk at the conventions, naturally, came from the prominent clergy delivering invocations and benedictions. Nearly each prayer, before Republicans and Democrats, was stately, slightly detached, and appealed to the Almighty in orthodox fashion without hitting theological hot spots. Largely they spoke the inclusive language of American civil religion.

Most prominent was New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan, who has outspokenly denounced Obamacare's contraceptive/abortifacients insurance mandate on religious institutions, including Catholic schools, hospitals, and charities. Several Catholic groups are suing the Administration, with the blessing of the U.S. Catholic bishops, of whom Cardinal Dolan is now president.

Dolan's scheduled appearance to close the Republican Convention with a benediction prompted the Democrats also to invite him. Doubtless his words

BLOOD:WATER MISSION founder Jena Lee Nardella, seen here with her husband James, delivered the Democratic National Convention's closing prayer on September 4. (Photo: Jenanardella.com)

have been closely examined for even veiled references to religious liberty, the unborn, or traditional marriage. His prayer before the Republicans was masterful. The Christian clergy have tried to cite Jesus without proclaiming an exclusively Christian prayer at a civic event.

So Dolan opened: "God, father of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus, we beg your continued blessings on this sanctuary of freedom, and on all of those who proudly call America home." He asked "benediction upon those yet to be born, and on those who are about to see you at the end of this life," obviously a soft reference to abortion. He asked blessing on families with long ago ancestors as well as more recent arrivals, a clear reference to immigration controversies. He prayed for the "huddled masses" by quoting the State of Liberty's inscription. Praying for office holders he asked, "Help them remember that the only just government is the government that serves its citizens rather than itself."

Dolan thanked God for the "singular gift of liberty," and he asked for "respect for religious freedom in full, that first most cherished freedom," with implications for Obamacare of course. He asked that freedom be tethered to "goodness" while also praying for military personnel. "May we know the truth of your creation, respecting the laws of nature and nature's God and not seek to replace it with idols of our own making," he prayed, perhaps referring to the defense of marriage while carefully echoing the Declaration of Independence. He also quoted from "America the Beautiful": "May you mend our every flaw, confirming our soul in self-control, our liberty in law." He concluded with praying for all around the world who seek freedom and by declaring: "For we are indeed one nation under God, and in God we trust."

The Greek Orthodox prelates who prayed before Republicans and Democrats were less prone to skirt the careful

edges of controversy. “You, who had fellowship with Abraham and Sarah, come and stay in our midst,” opened Metropolitan Nicholas of Detroit, who waxed inclusive while also echoing the Declaration of Independence in his invocation for the Democrats. “You have brought us here from every place on earth that Native Americans and immigrant Americans, people of color and of every tongue, might find not just hope but a land which seeks life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” He mentioned the unemployed and the needy: “Assist us to set aside personal differences so that the unity of purpose that we have will rise above us all as an enduring symbol of freedom and let freedom so reign in our hearts that we would never fear to lead the oppressed to freedom, never fear to give shelter to the homeless and displaced, never fear to treat our neighbor as ourselves.”

Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Methodios of Boston closed for the Republicans one evening with prayers for God’s “faithful sons,” Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan, while also quoting the Statue of Liberty, and mentioning Republican Party chief Reince Priebus, who is himself Orthodox. Also quoting the National Anthem, he cited “intrepid members of our armed forces who place themselves in harm’s way in defense of our freedom, and like our Founding Fathers, are steadfast in keeping America the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave.” And he prayed for the neglected, the hungry, the jobless, and crime victims.

The Republicans also had prayers from an Episcopal priest who pastors George H. W. Bush’s Houston congregation and who comes from the dwindling conservative side of that denomination. He also liked the Declaration of Independence: “We thank you for guiding our nation’s founders who secured the inalien-

able rights that you bestow upon us: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” And he appeared to be an American Exceptionalist: “May America continue to be a light unto all the nations, enabling those who lead us to make dreams, hopes and aspirations of all Americans into realities, and to make the American ideal a certainty not just for some, but for all.” Plus he honored the military: “May we never forget that our freedoms have been won with the blood and the sacrifice of our patriots, always remember that our industry and innovation has been forged with the sweat and toil of American men and women, always believe that houses of worship and places of service are born

crats and Republicans for their help with ministry in Africa. More explicitly than the Christian clergy, her prayer cited Christ: “God I thank you for the saving grace of Jesus and for the saints who have humbly gone before us.” And she closed by quoting St. Francis.

The most discordant clergy remarks came from African Methodist Episcopal Church Bishop Vashti McKenzie, who also co-chairs the Democratic Convention’s Rules Committee. Earlier in the day before her invocation, she unapologetically explained: “So we are here in Charlotte to make sure President Obama returns to the White House...to take back the House of Representatives and

elect a stronger majority in the U.S. Senate.” In her later prayer, she asked for divine help against the “ancient enemies again: injustice, poverty, apathy racism, and sexism, and an evil violence that stains the tapestry of the twenty-first century with the blood of the innocent and unsuspecting.” And she implored: “Do not allow again women to be enslaved by prehistoric ideas about biological function.”

Both parties would do well with prayers at their

conventions from clergy who strive to rise above the partisan fray. Most of the clergy and other prayers did so. More reassuringly, the convention prayers indicate that both parties realize that most Americans still aspire to a democracy premised on transcendent truths. Whether politicians hearken to the prayers is another question. But at least the acknowledgment, however uneven, is still there, and likely not going away. ■



PRAYER WAS PRESENT at both political parties’ meetings, as seen at the Republican National Convention in late August. (Photo: YouTube)

of the fruit of your inspiration, the desire to honor and serve others, and may we never forget that we are at our best when we know in our hearts that we are not just one nation, but one nation under God.”

An Episcopalian also prayed for the Democrats. She was Jena Nardella, an Episcopal lay woman who founded a nonprofit called “Blood:Water Mission,” which helps Africans with clean water and HIV clinics. She attends a traditional Nashville church and has ties to evangelicals, including conservative Anglicans who have left the Episcopal Church. Nardella prayed for both Obama and Romney. Even more ambitiously she prayed for the election to be “honest and edifying,” while thanking both Demo-



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Nun on a Mission—But Whose?



by Addie Darling

Last September's Democratic National Convention highlighted many issues involving the Catholic Church.

Following three days of speeches by Sandra Fluke, Nancy Keenan, and Cecile Richards, among others, that stressed the party's stances on reproductive issues—including a new position that firmly endorses on-demand abortions—the head of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), Timothy Cardinal Dolan, gave the convention's closing blessing.

Of course, Cardinal Dolan and the USCCB have come into conflict with President Obama and the modern reproductive orthodoxy due to the oft-referenced "HHS Mandate." This mandatory addition to the Affordable Care Act requires all employers to pay for their employees' preventative care—including the provision of contraceptives, sterilizations, and some abortifacients.¹ This coverage is mandated for all but a select few institutions deemed religious enough to qualify for an exemption. It has prompted

a string of lawsuits filed by various dioceses, schools, and charities throughout the country against the mandate.

But there was another Catholic voice speaking for the Church at the Democratic National Convention: Sister Simone Campbell, best known recently for her "Nuns on the Bus" tour to protest Republican federal budget policies, delivered a seven-minute prime-time address on Wednesday night of the convention. A member of the Sisters of Social Service and Executive Director of the lobbying group NETWORK, Sister Simone Campbell and her organizations have presented themselves as an alternative Catholicism to that of the bishops, tradition, and the Church.

Sister Campbell's celebrity and occasional controversy does not detract from her work as a servant of the poor and the marginalized. Campbell spent the first 18 years of her ministry as a lawyer, working on family law cases for the poor in Southern California. In that time, she also served as the general of her religious order, the Sisters of Social Service, organizing and directing

ON SEPTEMBER 5, Sister Simone Campbell, organizer of the "Nuns on a Bus" tour, spoke at the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, North Carolina. (Photo: National Women's Law Center)

her community's service in the United States, Mexico, Taiwan, and the Philippines. Later she served as the Executive Director of JERICHO, an advocacy organization for those living in poverty in the state of California, and acted as part of a Catholic Relief Services delegation in 2002 to minister to Iraqi refugees in Lebanon and Syria shortly before the start of the Iraq War.

Campbell's work through NETWORK radically reinterprets Catholic teaching, reinventing some of its fundamental tenants of charity, obedience, and service. Her revision of Catholic teaching places politics over principle, with the interpretation of doctrine by a magisterium of nuns and popular opinion as the ultimate judge.

As the Executive Director of NETWORK, Sister Campbell has led the organization in advocating for justice for the poor, conservation of the environment,

access to appropriate healthcare, just treatment for immigrants and migrant workers, and rebuilding the Gulf Coast. These goals are admirable, and not in opposition to Catholic teaching.

What is opposed to Catholic teaching, as well as the larger question of what is religion's proper relationship with politics, is NETWORK's approach. The organization takes a very narrow view of what "Catholic Social Teaching" permits, and puts the weight of Catholic doctrine behind nationalized healthcare, larger government programs, and liberal political policies.

Such a declaration of "Catholic Social Teaching" is disingenuous for several reasons. Firstly, it ignores the impact of such programs and political programs upon fundamental Catholic teachings on life and the integrity of the traditional family. For instance, during her speech at the Democratic National Convention, Sister Campbell supported the affordable care act—including provisions for abortion—"as part of my pro-life stance." Yet she has said that it would be "above my pay grade" to say that abortion ought not to be legal or that doctors who perform abortions ought to face penalties.

Secondly, NETWORK presents their interpretation on the prudential matters of the economy, environmental policy, and healthcare as the only legitimate Catholic interpretation of Church teaching. Such pronouncements fly in the face of Church teaching itself. As mentioned in Kieran Raval's article on this issue,² even the Pope acknowledges that "not all moral issues have the same moral weight as abortion and euthanasia." And Catholics are free to disagree on matters of prudence, such as how best to support citizen's health and the economy.

Lastly, Sister Campbell's narrow view of social justice and obedience mocks the institution of the Church itself. Her views on social justice invoke bishops where it fits her goals, but ignore them when they do not fit her agenda, diminishing the importance of the teachings of the Church and bishops to just another voice in the crowd. The Vatican has criticized both NETWORK and the Leadership Conference

of Women Religious (LCWR), of which the Sisters of Social Service are members, for their omission of fundamental Church teachings on life, family, and theological matters of women's ordination.

According to Sister Campbell, this call for reform was naught more than a publicity opportunity. On April 27, she tweeted:

So glad that the Vatican attempt to change our mission is resulting in a higher profile for us @hardball! A joke of the Holy Spirit?
—Sr. Simone Campbell (@sr_simone)

She continued her marginalization of the Vatican's critiques on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* during a promotion for her "Nuns on a Bus" tour. During a mocking sketch, the sister stated "the Vatican says we work too much for the needs of people who live in poverty," and that any commentary on issues integral to the foundations of Catholic social justice itself is "not our mission."

Seemingly not even her vows of obedience as a religious sister to the Church and Her precepts are safe from a radical re-interpretation. When asked on *The Colbert Report* about the Vatican's assertion that NETWORK and the LCWR are guilty of straying from faithfulness to teaching and vows, Sister Campbell responds, "Actually, what I'll admit is that we're faithful to the Gospel." Again, such a pronouncement places her own interpretation of fidelity and faith above that of the institution she claims to be part of.

Even the matter of the Church's ability to practice its beliefs freely is mocked by Sister Campbell. On Twitter, she has belittled the USCCB's reaction to the HHS mandate as "a scandal," saying in a February 12 tweet that "Catholic bishops don't understand that EVERYONE's conscience should be respected not just theirs."

While the Church in the United States has been embroiled in a battle to preserve its ability to serve the poor and act out the mission it preaches, Sister Campbell has been on a crusade to redefine "life issues" to include policies that support abortion, to present a liberal interpretation of Catholic social justice as the only legitimate interpretation of

Church doctrine—ignoring all teachings to the contrary, and to undermine any teachings of those who are not in line with her narrow set of beliefs—including the teachings of those to whom Sister Simone Campbell has pledged her obedience.

In presenting Sister Campbell as a Catholic voice with equal—if not greater—weight and importance as the head of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Democratic National Convention has shown that it values only what religion and religious persons can provide politically. Virtues such as fidelity, integrity and freedom are passé. In the meantime, Sister Campbell has shown through her actions and words that she serves a church, but it is a congregation of yes-men and radical individual interpretation, not a church of principles and self-sacrifice, and not the Roman Catholic Church. We pray that she, NETWORK and the LCWR return to the faith of their foundations and a fuller understanding of the Church. ☩

1. Opposition to the HHS Mandate by Cardinal Dolan, the USCCB, and the opposition to the mandate by various other politicians and public figures has been dubbed a "War on Women." However, while the mandate requires coverage for pregnancy prevention, sterilization and abortion, it does not cover (1) heart disease medications or aspirin, even though heart disease is the #1 cause of death for women in the USA; (2) condoms, which are the only effective means of STD prevention save for abstinence; (3) chemopreventative medicines for breast cancer—which is responsible for 1 in 4 cancer deaths in women; and (4) prenatal screenings. The mandate also requires the coverage of chemical contraceptives even though these artificial hormones place women at a greater risk of certain cancers—including breast cancer—blood clots, heart disease, and stroke—particularly if these drugs are taken long-term.

These oversights in preventative care place women's fertility in a whole separate class of health care, and this preference for so-called "women's health" over prevention of the two most fatal diseases for women as well as prenatal screenings leads to an implicit message from the administration that the unique trait of women's fertility is something to be controlled and medicated against instead of embraced and supported. In other words: women's natural fertility is a plague worse than death.

2. Kieran Raval, "Paul Ryan and the Catholic Divide," page 9.



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Islam and America

by Rick J. Plasterer

ISLAM has come to dominate the public discourse. (Photo: The Blaze)

The conflict of adhering to and advancing traditional Islam in the highly liberal and modern societies of the West, including modern America, was apparent at the 2012 conference of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), which had the theme “One Nation Under God: Striving for the Common Good.” Founded in 1981 by Muslim Brotherhood members and investigated at times for terrorist connections, it positions itself as a “unifying” Islamic organization for North American Muslims, advancing an orthodox Sunni Islam while deeply engaged in interfaith activities. Its annual conventions are open to all, and endeavor to address issues of living as Muslims in America and presenting a positive image to the wider society. ISNA hosted the August 31–September 3 event in Washington, D.C. Prominent non-Muslim speakers included Jim Wallis and the retired Catholic Archbishop of Washington, D.C., Theodore McCarrick.

Feisel Abdul Rauf, the New York imam associated with the proposal to construct the “Ground Zero Mosque,” spoke on the “One nation under God” concept as a way Muslims can claim Americanism. God has created mankind for a particular purpose, and this purpose is the “common good” of mankind. He said the Tea Party movement has redefined the center of the Republican Party, and he suggested that moderate Republicans should cooperate with Democrats, presumably to offset this development.

Zaid Shakir of Zaytuna College in Berkeley, California, then used the term “equalizing” to refer to the error of the modern West. True equality comes from God, because true universals come from God. Shakir offered the Ottoman “millet”

system, which recognized Christian and Jewish communities as inferior communities, as a commendable alternative to Western “equalizing.” He said the rejection of the traditional understanding of sharia leads to “equalizing.”

Three authors summarized their books about Islam. Zia U. Sheikh reviewed his book *Islam: Silencing the Critics*, Manzoor Hussain reviewed his *Islam: An Essential Understanding for Fellow Americans*, and Ejaz Naqvi reviewed his *The Quran: With or Against the Bible?* Sheikh focused on the negativity about Islam since 9/11, and he claimed that much misunderstanding is based on taking Koranic verses out of context. Naqvi said that his book tried to highlight similarities between the Bible and the Koran, calling his work “non-apologetic.” He claimed that the Koran refers to Christians and Jews as believers in the present tense, and so this is also the divine view of them, a position he takes in interfaith encounters.

On the other hand, Hussain claimed that Christians and Jews are traditionally considered true believers only if they accept Islam, or were in circumstances where they had not heard and rejected Mohammed’s message. He agreed that the term for God in the Bible and the Koran are the same; the word “Allah” simply means “the deity,” and is used by Arabic speaking Christians and Jews to refer to God. Evangelical talk radio was discussed, with the Evangelical doctrine of justification by faith criticized. It was asserted that the Evangelical understanding of receiving Jesus as Savior leaves people free to do whatever they want. Also defended was the controversial Islamic penalty of death for apostasy, with the claim that this penalty arose as a result of the original Islamic state considering apostasy to be a form of treason. Convicted apostates can easily get out from under their sentence by making a

verbal confession of Islam, it was asserted; it is not the practice of Muslim authorities to inquire into sincerity. This kind of solution, of course, is not possible for believing Christians who regard Christ as the only way to salvation.

Also presenting were several non-Muslim religious leaders: Rabbi David Saperstein, retired Archbishop Theodore McCarrick, and Rev. Jim Wallis of Sojourners. They generally condemned the suspicion of Islam found among American conservatives, while their comments would imply a challenge to any exclusivist religion. Rabbi Saperstein referred to hate crimes and said there is “no place for hate” (what this means for exclusivist religions, including Islam, was not addressed; “no place” might literally mean no place in society). Cardinal McCarrick quoted Pope John Paul II as saying that Christians, Jews, and Muslims are “brothers and sisters in faith in one God.”

Wallis said he was delighted to be with his “brothers” on stage. He said the “nation has lost the common good,” and that “offensive, dangerous and frightening things” are being said against Muslims, but “we will win this battle for truth and religious freedom.” He compared contemporary anti-Muslim sentiment to past anti-Catholic sentiment and to anti-Semitism. But, “relationships happen,” overcoming hostile attitudes, and “acting together is what is going to bring us together,” Wallis said.

Clearly, a tension between uncompromising orthodox Islam and an American society moving ever further from any traditional way of life and thought will be a continued source of contention among this religious community. ■



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National Council of Churches' Perfect Storm

by Jeffrey H. Walton



One year after officials with the National Council of Churches (NCC) described “a perfect storm” hitting the ecumenical body, the NCC board has drastically cut staff, budget, and the scope of the council’s work. Salvaging the once-prestigious NCC was described as an effort to return the council to “the leading edge of ecumenism,” while the few remaining staff are being styled as “theologically trained community organizers.”

The NCC, which counts The United Methodist, Episcopal and Presbyterian (U.S.A.) churches among its members, once employed hundreds of staffers at its Manhattan headquarters. Today, the council has shrunk to a dozen full-time and a handful of part-time and contract employees with a budget of just under \$3 million.

Representatives of 19 of the council’s 37 member communions (denominations) voted without opposition to adopt the recommendations of a restructuring task force during the organization’s September 17–18 meeting in New York. The restructuring has been forced by steep drops in foundation funding paired with eroding contributions from member churches and the swift draining of financial reserves, climaxing with a budget shortfall in excess of \$1 million this year alone.

Like the previous gathering in May, much of the meeting was closed. The open sessions of the September meeting focused on self-preservation. “There is a real urgency we have felt in the last few months,” NCC president Kathryn Lohre explained.

According to NCC Transitional General Secretary Peg Birk, the council has redistributed the work of nine employees over the past year, with seven staff departing since May. Many of the departing staff were longtime fixtures at the NCC, having more than 100 years of combined

work with the council. The most recent departures were the third major round of layoffs at the NCC since 2007.

“The reductions in staff and shrinking revenues have also impacted the capacity to provide the level of staff support some Commissions, Committees and Working Groups have come to rely upon,” Birk wrote in her report to the council. The NCC reorganization, she described, was like moving into a new “energy efficient home” from an historic cathedral. Staff, Birk wrote, were bogged down with “elaborate governance processes” and bureaucracy (such as a complex accounting system) “indicative of the way the NCC has done business in the past” with 120 programs and 90 funding sources for a budget of under \$3 million.

“There is an urgent need to move faster than a glacial pace,” Birk assessed in commending the task force’s suggested plan to the governing board.


Council staff may not be the only ones to see cuts. In November, the governing board will vote on a plan likely to shrink the governing board itself down to just heads of communion. Task force members argued this would restore the board to a governing, rather than management, role. Also on the table is the possibility of creating dues structures for new categories of affiliation.

The lack of church support for the council in recent years has been a sore subject at the NCC: In the last fiscal year, only 21 of the NCC’s 37 member communions gave any gift to the council, with several contributions being mere token amounts. Five churches have given nothing in the past decade. Gifts to the (unrestricted) Ecumenical Commitment Fund are expected to continue dropping from \$1,035,033 last year to a budgeted \$900,000 this year.

NCC OFFICIALS describe themselves as victims of a “perfect storm.” (Photo: Wunderground)

“It matters to [foundation] funders if members are contributing at 100 percent,” Birk explained, noting that some prospective donors balked at financing programs when member churches were not already doing so. The NCC was more than \$100,000 short in expected foundation funding in 2011–12, dropping from a budgeted \$700,000 to \$596,500. The council has received \$180,000 towards a more modestly budgeted \$400,000 expected level of foundation support this year.

The NCC has toyed in the past with the possibility of a minimum contribution from member churches, but the council has been reluctant to apply such a policy to its constituency of churches, many of which are financially strapped themselves. Also mentioned was the NCC’s possibly relocating to smaller quarters, or even merging with the Washington office in the United Methodist Building.

The task force report lists three areas for NCC focus: theological study and dialogue, inter-religious relations and dialogue, and advocacy for “justice and peace.” Of the three, the council’s staff reorganization heavily favors advocacy. While most finance, development, and administration employees are now gone, the advocacy-focused Washington office lost only one staffer. Most who remain have an “Eco-Justice” focus, hinting that remaining grants from secular foundations are mostly tied to environmental advocacy. 



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IRD Diary: Being Known for What We Are For

by Luke W. Moon

Back in the day when I was less faithful and a lot more concerned about what people thought about me, I would declare, “*Christians should be known for what we are for rather than what we are against.*” My “backslider” and non-Christian friends would nod in agreement. It sounds so simple, right? Surely no one will turn that against us if we just say nice, noncontroversial things. Sadly, reality is profoundly different from my youthful naiveté.

I might shrug this off if I did not hear the statement so often these days from Emergent Church leaders or those on the Evangelical Left who would prefer the faithful Church to be more accommodating on issues of sexuality and salvation. Yet in most cases the use of this phrase can be chalked up to ignorance and a misunderstanding of the nature of public discourse. Take for example the song “Jesus, Friend of Sinners” by the band Casting Crowns:

Jesus, friend of sinners
The One whose writing in the sand
Made the righteous turn away
And the stones fall from their hands
Help us to remember
We are all the least of these
Let the memory of Your mercy
Bring Your people to their knees

*Nobody knows what we're for
Only what we're against
When we judge the wounded
What if we put down our signs
Crossed over the lines
And loved like You did*

Many of us say “Yes and amen” to the first part of the verse, but the second stanza contains an ignorant comment. It’s ignorant because on important matters of public policy—those matters Christians are

known to have strong opinions about—we often talk about what we are for. But talking about what we are for does not matter if our words are twisted. Three recent prominent policy issues illustrate my point.

Several months ago, the people of North Carolina went to the polls to vote for an amendment to the state constitution. The amendment states, “*Marriage between one man and one woman is the only domestic legal union that shall be valid or recognized in this State. This section does not prohibit a private party from entering into contracts with another private party; nor does this section prohibit courts from adjudicating the rights of private parties pursuant to such contracts.*” As it turns out 61% of the voters in North Carolina voted *for* this amendment. Nowhere does the amendment say it is anti-gay marriage. However, in the media Amendment 1 became known as the anti-gay marriage law when in reality it was the pro-marriage between one man and one woman law.

Over the last forty years, defenders of the pre-born have made a valiant effort to hold onto the term “pro-life.” In spite of recent efforts by the EPA and the environmental lobby to steal the phrase so that even abortion advocates qualify as pro-life, the term is understood as being *for* protecting the life of pre-born babies. As with the marriage issue, faithful Christians are not recognized for being “pro” anything, but rather we are labeled as anti-abortion, anti-woman, anti-choice. A simple survey of major news networks, including Fox News, shows journalists preferring “anti-abortion” over “pro-life.”

Finally, the Health and Human Services (HHS) mandate, as of August 1, 2012, requires insurance companies to provide free sterilization services and contracep-

tion in the form of birth control pills and prescriptions that cause abortions. As expected, Catholic and Protestant universities and hospitals objected to being required to cover services that go against the moral teachings of their faith. These proud institutions were accused of starting a “War on Women” rather than simply asking to be allowed to qualify under the religious exemption. In being *for* religious liberty one becomes labeled anti-woman.

Words matter and labels are part of the discourse on social policy issues. Labels are not inherently evil, for they play an important role in helping us process information. (Just try to live without labels on the cans in your cupboard.) However, Christians are constantly being labeled as anti-gay, anti-women, anti-science, anti-environment, etc. Despite sad examples of Christians saying hurtful and mean things, the vast majority of Christians are *for* human flourishing and living by the high standard that God has set for us.

By joining the chorus of voices that say, “Christians should be known by what we are for, rather than what we are against,” we ignorantly affirm the negative view of Christians rather than confronting the misapplied label. As our culture drifts from its Christian mooring, we should expect false labeling to increase. Ultimately, we should not expect the world to speak well of us. Jesus told us they won’t (Matthew 10:17–22), but we can choose how we speak about ourselves. 6



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