

Roger composes brilliant reflections on the Sunday readings from the Lectionary. I am pleased to have them forwarded to me by Joe. Here is an excerpt from his notes for February 7th.

Few biblical passages are more important than "call narratives." From Yahweh's call to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 12 to Jesus' gospel calls of his disciples. When the original readers of Scripture heard the word "call" in any writing, their ears perked up and they listened intently. Long before Jesus' followers separated themselves into clergy and laity, all who followed Yahweh and/or Jesus were convinced they, like their biblical counterparts, had also been called.

Though many of my grade school teachers assured us everyone would receive a call to a specific "vocation," only those who heard a voice beckoning, or felt a pull to the priesthood or religious life really seemed to have been called by God. If you were among those who didn't hear that particular voice or experience that special pull, it was understood God was expecting you to get married and raise a bunch of kids - one of whom might one day hear the call you never received.

Our sacred authors know nothing about calls to the priesthood or religious life. Those two ways of living the faith developed long after our biblical canon was closed. Scripture writers know only about the call all disciples of Yahweh or Jesus receive: a call to be open to doing whatever God asks. That's why biblical call narratives are so significant. They prompt the faithful to reflect on their own calls and the consequences which come when one responds "Yes!" to them.

Though these narratives are frequently found at the beginning of many books, these passages are probably some of the last to take form. The closer to the end of one's life, the clearer one's call becomes.

... No matter the situation or our unworthiness, Paul tells us God never summons us to deal in minutiae. Discipleship always consists in proclaiming the most important parts of our faith. The Apostle reminds his Corinthian community, "I handed on to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins...; that he was buried...; that he was raised on the third day; that he appeared. . . ." Our insistence on these basics of faith should be the outward sign that God, in the person of the risen Jesus, has broken into our lives. Unlike some manifestations of religious life, we wear no distinguishing clothes, sport no honorific titles, demand no special privileges. We simply spend our lives constantly dying and rising with Jesus.

President George W. Bush is honored by Legatus (whom?) because he is pro-life. Genevieve Pollock composed the following article.

DANA POINT, California (Zenit.org) - Catholic business executives of Legatus are gathering today to honor former President George W. Bush and Cardinal Francis George, hear Newt Gingrich's conversion story and watch his new film.

These are just some of the highlights of the Legatus annual summit in Dana Point, the group's executive director, John Hunt, explained to ZENIT.

Legatus announced last month that the former U.S. president is attending the summit, which began today and will end Saturday, to receive its prestigious Cardinal John J. O'Connor Pro-Life Award.

"You could argue that he was the most pro-life president in our lifetime," Hunt affirmed.

An article in Legatus magazine cited Bush's declaration of Jan. 18, 2009, as "National Sanctity of Human Life Day," one of his last acts as president. At that time, the president affirmed that, "the most basic duty of government is to protect the life of the innocent."

Bush's 2001-2009 presidency terms were marked by "pro-life policies that included opposition to embryonic stem-cell research, the appointment of two pro-life Supreme Court Justices, an executive order barring federal funds to be used for abortion-related projects abroad, and a rule protecting federally funded health employees from taking part in abortion or practices that conflict with their faith," the magazine recalled.

The following article, "Democracy in America Is a Useful Fiction" by Chris Hedges, is available in its entirety at:

http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/democracy_in_america_is_a_useful_fiction_20100124/

Corporate forces, long before the Supreme Court's decision in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, carried out a coup d'état in slow motion. The coup is over. We lost. The ruling is one more judicial effort to streamline mechanisms for corporate control. It exposes the myth of a functioning democracy and the triumph of corporate power. But it does not significantly alter the political landscape. The corporate state is firmly cemented in place.

The fiction of democracy remains useful, not only for corporations, but for our bankrupt liberal class. If the fiction is seriously challenged, liberals will be forced to consider actual resistance, which will be neither pleasant nor easy. As long as a democratic facade exists, liberals can engage in an empty moral posturing that requires little sacrifice or commitment. They can be the self-appointed scolds of the Democratic Party, acting as if they are part of the debate and feel vindicated by their cries of protest.

Much of the outrage expressed about the court's ruling is the outrage of those who prefer this choreographed charade. As long as the charade is played, they do not have to consider how to combat what the political philosopher Sheldon Wolin calls our system of "inverted totalitarianism."

Inverted totalitarianism represents "the political coming of age of corporate power

and the political demobilization of the citizenry," Wolin writes in "Democracy Incorporated." Inverted totalitarianism differs from classical forms of totalitarianism, which revolve around a demagogue or charismatic leader, and finds its expression in the anonymity of the corporate state. The corporate forces behind inverted totalitarianism do not, as classical totalitarian movements do, boast of replacing decaying structures with a new, revolutionary structure. They purport to honor electoral politics, freedom and the Constitution. But they so corrupt and manipulate the levers of power as to make democracy impossible.

... Corporations have 35,000 lobbyists in Washington and thousands more in state capitals that dole out corporate money to shape and write legislation. They use their political action committees to solicit employees and shareholders for donations to fund pliable candidates. The financial sector, for example, spent more than \$5 billion on political campaigns, influence peddling and lobbying during the past decade, which resulted in sweeping deregulation, the gouging of consumers, our global financial meltdown and the subsequent looting of the U.S. Treasury. The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America spent \$26 million last year and drug companies such as Pfizer, Amgen and Eli Lilly kicked in tens of millions more to buy off the two parties. These corporations have made sure our so-called health reform bill will force us to buy their predatory and defective products. The oil and gas industry, the coal industry, defense contractors and telecommunications companies have thwarted the drive for sustainable energy and orchestrated the steady erosion of civil liberties. Politicians do corporate bidding and stage hollow acts of political theater to keep the fiction of the democratic state alive.

There is no national institution left that can accurately be described as democratic. Citizens, rather than participate in power, are allowed to have virtual opinions to preordained questions, a kind of participatory fascism as meaningless as voting on "American Idol." Mass emotions are directed toward the raging culture wars. This allows us to take emotional stands on issues that are inconsequential to the power elite.

... Liberals, socialists, trade unionists, independent journalists and intellectuals, many of whom were once important voices in our society, have been silenced or targeted for elimination within corporate-controlled academia, the media and government. Wolin, who taught at Berkeley and later at Princeton, is arguably the country's foremost political philosopher. And yet his book was virtually ignored. This is also why Ralph Nader, Dennis Kucinich and Cynthia McKinney, along with intellectuals like Noam Chomsky, are not given a part in our national discourse.

The uniformity of opinion is reinforced by the skillfully orchestrated mass emotions of nationalism and patriotism, which paints all dissidents as "soft" or "unpatriotic." The "patriotic" citizen, plagued by fear of job losses and possible terrorist attacks, unflinchingly supports widespread surveillance and the militarized state. This means no questioning of the \$1 trillion in defense-related spending. It means that the military and intelligence agencies are held above government, as if somehow they are not part of government. The most powerful instruments of state power and control are effectively removed from public discussion. We, as imperial citizens, are taught to be contemptuous of government bureaucracy, yet we stand like sheep before

Homeland Security agents in airports and are mute when Congress permits our private correspondence and conversations to be monitored and archived. We endure more state control than at any time in American history.

The civic, patriotic and political language we use to describe ourselves remains unchanged. We pay fealty to the same national symbols and iconography. We find our collective identity in the same national myths. We continue to deify the Founding Fathers. But the America we celebrate is an illusion. It does not exist. Our government and judiciary have no real sovereignty. Our press provides diversion, not information. Our organs of security and power keep us as domesticated and as fearful as most Iraqis. Capitalism, as Karl Marx understood, when it emasculates government, becomes a revolutionary force. And this revolutionary force, best described as inverted totalitarianism, is plunging us into a state of neo-feudalism, perpetual war and severe repression. The Supreme Court decision is part of our transformation by the corporate state from citizens to prisoners.

The following article, "How not to talk about God: An interview with Karen Armstrong" appeared in *U.S. CATHOLIC* in January. [Subscribe!](#)

How do people understand God in Western culture today?

The idea of God is treated as fact today. A lot of people see God as a discrete personality; God is a creator in the same way as you or I create something. □ In the 17th century in the West and during the Enlightenment, scientists and philosophers such as Isaac Newton and René Descartes believed that they could prove God's existence scientifically. They said science was the best path to all truth. The other ways of coming to truth, such as art or mysticism or ritual, were downplayed. God became a fact, pure and simple.

What's wrong with seeing God as fact?

Theologians like St. Thomas Aquinas have said that God doesn't exist like you or me or this chair. They said you couldn't say God exists because exist is too limited a word.

That wasn't meant to just put the kibosh on all discussion, but to acknowledge the inadequacy of speech about God and to make room for a sense of transcendence. One Catholic British theologian has defined theology as speech that's segues into silence, rather than worthy statements and definitions. The scientific "proofs" of God are being disproved. That could be a good thing because it could shock people out of this literal thinking, but they don't always get much help from clergy on this. Clergy fell in love with science, too. We have developed a kind of lust for unsustainable certainty.

Science and religion are often cast as opponents today. How has the relationship between them changed?

Science and religion once were best friends. Seeking absolute certainty, churchmen and theologians made Newton's God-the original cause and all-powerful being that controlled creation through Newton's theory of universal mechanics-central to their mission, later adding naturalist William Paley's understanding of God as an "intelligent designer." In the 19th century the one Enlightenment thought that evangelicals seized upon was Newton's scientific proof of God.

Then Charles Darwin found a natural explanation for life itself, and this threw religious people for a loop. They had no other resource to understand God except as creator so they developed defensive fundamentalism with a growing antagonism toward science that hadn't been there before.

In the fourth century St. Augustine said that if a biblical text contradicted science, believers had to find a new interpretation of that text. That was the practice right through to the 17th century. Even at the dawn of the scientific revolution, a witty Vatican cardinal said that in the Bible the Holy Spirit is telling us how to go to heaven, not how the heavens go.

In the past people knew that science and religion had different goals; they were complementary. Science can help you diagnose and treat your cancer, but it cannot touch the despair and dismay and terror you feel when you get the diagnosis, nor can it help you die well. For that people turn to religion, or more broadly speaking, to myth, the stories and beliefs that, when put into practice, answer our deeper questions about the more elusive, puzzling, and tragic aspects of our human predicament.

What happens to religion when you mix science and faith?

People thought that science would absolutely refute atheism, but once you have domesticated God and reduced God to a mere fact, atheism is only a matter of time. Religious language must always point beyond itself into the silence of transcendence. If it becomes an end in itself, religion becomes idolatry. □ You can see that in the early modern scientists. Newton says he found proof for an omniscient, all-powerful, dominant force, who is, Newton claims, "very well skilled in mechanics and geometry." This is clearly a projection of Newton himself.

Mathematician and astronomer Johannes Kepler is said to have cried aloud in joy while doing his research, "O God, I think thy thoughts after thee." That's idolatry.

... Religion is hard work. Above all it demands a compassionate lifestyle. This is the test of religiosity in every single one of the major world traditions. Most of our doctrines were originally calls to action.

How so?

Incarnation is a call to action. St. Paul says that Jesus was in the image of God, but he didn't cling to that; he emptied himself of ego and took on the likeness of a servant and even accepted death on the cross, for which reason God exalted him. Paul introduces this concept by saying you must have the same mind as Christ Jesus: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3).

Religious truth makes no sense unless you put it into action. It remains as dry and abstract as the rules of a board game, which sound incredibly dull and incomprehensible until you pick up the dice and play.

Are there other doctrines that could help us recover the sense of religion as practice?

We never really got Trinity in the West, but it was also a spiritual practice. In the early Greek church, the Trinity would be imparted not just as a jingle-- "Three in one and one in three, oh, the noble Trinity"--but as a meditation after the transformative initiation of Baptism.

You swing your mind back from the three manifestations of God that we can sense, to the *ousia* of God, the one that we can never know, backward and forward. The doctrine is simply the end of the meditation.

You have to go through the meditation and keep doing it all your life to understand Trinity. It's described very much as a transcendent experience. Ancient theologians were trying to remind Christians that it was impossible to think about God as a simple personality.

But Christians do think of God as having distinct personalities, including that Jesus is God.

To say Jesus is God is a partial expression of the divine. God is unnamable. You can never know the essence of the divine. But God has adapted this ineffable transcendence to our limited understanding and has come to meet us. So Christians have experienced God as Father, a sort of brooding, sort of caring presence; as Spirit immanent within us; and as Word, which is spoken in Jesus and in creation.

These are the external, like my gestures and my clothes and my words are me. But they don't exactly define what "me" is. We know God's external qualities, but we can never know his *ousia* or inner nature.

How is the experience of transcendence connected to compassionate action?

You won't get transcendence unless you are compassionate. To be compassionate is to dethrone yourself from the center of your world and put

another there, to transcend yourself. You go beyond the selfishness and hatred that imprisons us and limits our vision.

Today we concentrate so much on defining what we're transcending to--God--whereas in the past they concentrated more what we're transcending from: selfishness, greed, hatred, all of which springs from ego.

But isn't the goal of faith to get to heaven, "to meet our Maker"?

I'm not interested in the afterlife. When Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven, he means something very earthbound. The kingdom, the reign of God on earth, is a Jewish concept, and Jews don't go much for afterlife.

Paul says, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9). That is, he doesn't know. If that's good enough for St. Paul, it's good enough for me.

If all religious life is reduced to getting into heaven, and all your good deeds are about getting up there, as it was for me as a child, this is no more religious than paying into a retirement annuity. Heaven is supposed to be about the loss of ego, not about preoccupation with its eternal survival in optimum conditions.

Also, if we do not experience a bit of the eternal now by hard, dedicated practice, it's no good thinking we'll get anything like that after we die.

The Case for God responds to today's militant atheism, like that of Richard Dawkins, but you also say in the book that you would welcome "an informed atheistic critique."

I would, but Dawkins' critique is not informed. Richard Dawkins on theology is frankly painful to read. As British literary critic Terry Eagleton said in his review, "Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the *Book of British Birds*, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology."

I don't like the regression of the dialogue on either side. It is uncompassionate, counterproductive, and all about ego. But an informed critique could help us rid religion of idolatry and see the ineffability of the divine.

But now people are defensively hanging on to a concrete image of God, and once people get defensive, they can get aggressive, too.

How should we respond to atheism?

We need a rethink. We can't reproduce the spiritualities of the past because we are 21st-century people, but we can learn from history and make the huge creative effort to translate its wisdom into our own time.

That's going to be hard work, and people have gotten lazy about religion. They think it should be easy. They go in and sing a couple of hymns once a week at Mass and then return to their normal lives unscathed by the demands of the tradition. I think we need to reinstate the idea of religion as primarily practice.

What do you think of Pope Benedict XVI's attempt to respond to the wider culture where Catholicism and religion in general is losing influence?

If he thinks all Europeans are going to become Catholic, this is just not going to happen. He has not been good with other faiths, either.

I'd tell him, let's go into dialogue prepared to be changed. **(Yes!)** That's the only way dialogue works. Go into dialogue as you did in Socrates' day, prepared in the end to realize that you knew nothing, to realize transcendence. No one can have the last word on God, and we can learn so much from other people's insights.

What about the fear that this will lead to relativism? Is there value in each community pursuing its own path?

I think that's the best way, even though I can't do it.

Catholics in England have been so vile to me over the years that I don't feel like I can go back to the church. I can't become Anglican, though, because in England Catholics never feel quite English, and Anglicanism is a celebration of being English as far as I can see. Islam and Buddhism are out of my culture, too.

I don't recommend my course to anybody else. This is just the result of my own personal, troubled religious history, and I healed myself by studying other faiths.

I think it's best to stay with your own because all the religions teach the same thing-compassion. Stress those aspects of tradition that speak of compassion and practice and humility and openness.

I was with the Dalai Lama at an interfaith conference once when he told a woman that converting from Christianity to Buddhism was a complete waste of her time. All faiths teach kindness. My religion is kindness, he said, and as for the highest states of meditation, he said, don't even go there.

The religions are not all the same. They each have their distinct genius, each their distinctive flavor, and each their particular flaws and failings. It's best, I think, if you can, to remain with one but learn from others.

What do you make of those who say they are "spiritual, but not religious"?

I can't stand that. Spiritual often just means some kind of wishy-washy me-ism, where I'm having a lovely experience without much discipline. You know, designer Kabbalah in Hollywood or designer yoga.

Yoga is not about aerobic exercise or finding the lovely oceanic peacefulness about yourself; it's about dismantling the ego. It demands hours of practice every day, not just a yoga class once a week. We've watered it down to be some kind of feel-good thing.

Some of the late medieval, early modern mystics who threw out all intellect in favor of spirituality were criticized for sitting around looking as if they had a bug in their ear because they only looked within themselves.

Spiritual can mean, "I feel very spiritual when I look at the sunset, but I'm quite happy to slag off Islam and not to give any money to charity. I'm quite OK with the fact that we've messed up the Middle East and people are dying every day in Iraq-not just our soldiers but others who are dying as a result of our mistakes. I'm quite happy with the inequality of our social system." That is not proper spirituality. Feeling is neither here nor there. You've got to get deeper than feeling. We know in our own lives that feelings come and go. Like Aquinas said, you can't feel God any more than you can know God.

If believe, feel, and know are out, what verb do you think best captures your relationship with God?

Seek. I seek and will seek forever without possibility of finding the clinching moment.

Karen Armstrong is calling all people to commit to the Charter of Compassion that she helped create. To read more: go to <http://charterforcompassion.org/>

Did you know that Mother Mary McKillop and Mother Theodore Guerin had both been excommunicated during their lifetimes – and have recently been canonized?

Please forward articles and send your comments to tony@tonyercolano.com.