

Testimony

A Pamphlet from Pax Christi Texas

Anticipating December 13, 2020

Communications with the editor should be sent to j6anthonyblasi@yahoo.com. Pax Christi International was founded in 1945 with the encouragement of Bishop Pierre Marie Théas of Montauban, France, by Marthe Dortel Claudot, as a Christian lay organization dedicated to preventing a repetition of the savagery of the twentieth century's world wars.

Editorial

After the calendar, the Sunday Liturgical Reading reflections are based on readings for the Third Sunday of Advent. Tom Keene's poem is *Beliefs and Faith*. For more of Tom's poems, see <http://www.tomkeeneandthemuse.com/index.php>. Following the poem is my meditation on "bad religion."

Calendar

(Times are given for the Central Time Zone)

Monday December 7, 11:00am-12:00pm, webinar "Reducing Global Security Risks: The Agenda for 2021 and Beyond," former Senator Sam Nunn and former Secretary of Energy Ernest J. Moniz (both of the Nuclear Threat Initiative); moderate by Neal F. Lane (Rice University). Register at: <https://riceconnect.rice.edu/Baker/ST-globalsecurity>

Monday December 7, 1:00pm-2:30pm (2:00pm-3:30pm ET) panel "New Tools in the Peacebuilding Toolbox: Impartial Observation and Nonviolent Action," Josefina Echavarría Alvarez (Peace Accords Matrix Program). Information: <https://kroc.nd.edu/news-events/events/2020/12/07/connect-with-the-kroc-institute-at-the-alliance-for-peacebuilding-conference/>

Tuesday December 8, 10:00am-11:30am (11:00am-12:30pm ET) panel "Moving Forward Together: Stories of Peacebuilding as They Seek Greater Complementarity Across the System," John Paul Lederach (University of Notre Dame). Information: <https://kroc.nd.edu/news->

events/events/2020/12/07/connect-with-the-kroc-institute-at-the-alliance-for-peacebuilding-conference/

Tuesday December 8, 3:00pm-4:30pm (4:00pm-5:30pm ET) panel “Strengthening Intergroup Social Cohesion in Fragile Contexts: Policy and Practice Implications from the Latest Evidence,” Nell Bolton (Catholic Relief Services). Information: <https://kroc.nd.edu/news-events/events/2020/12/07/connect-with-the-kroc-institute-at-the-alliance-for-peacebuilding-conference/>

Thursday December 10, 11:30am-12:00pm (12:30pm-1:30pm ET) “The McCarrick Report: Findings, Lessons, and Directions,” John Carr (Georgetown University), Juan Carlos Cruz (Chilean victim who brought his case to Pope Francis), Kathleen Sprows Cummings (University of Notre Dame), David Gibson (Fordham University), and Bradford Hinze (Fordham University). RSVP at: <https://catholicsocialthought.georgetown.edu/events/the-mccarrick-report-findings-lessons-and-directions>

Thursday December 10, 12:15pm-1:15pm (1:15pm-2:15pm ET), webinar “Science and Solutions for a Planet under Pressure,” Michelle Wyman (National Council for Science and the Environment) and Chad Frischmann (Project Drawdown). Register at: <https://register.gotowebinar.com/register/4885726508772762123>

Saturday December 12, 9:30am-11:30am (10:30am-12:30pm ET), “Moving Beyond Victimization & Privilege: The Anti-Racism Challenge,” with Tom Cordaro and Cathy Crayton (former members, Pax Christi USA National Council), sponsored by Pax Christi Metropolitan New York. Obtain Zoom link from info@nypaxchristi.org. Suggested contribution \$10.00

Sunday December 13, 10:00am, “The Belhar Confession,” Rev. Greg Han (Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston). The online lecture concerns a protest against the use of the Bible to justify apartheid in South Africa. Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86564638381?pwd=MTBtSF16eVhoTUF3SXJ2VIBWd0N2QT09#success>

Monday December 14, 3:30pm-5:00pm, “Division in Our Nation, Division in Our Congregations,” Melissa Rogers (Delta Companies; former special assistant to President Obama), \$5.00. RSVP at:

<https://www.faithcommons.org/event/division-in-our-nation-division-in-our-congregations/>

Wednesday December 16, 12:00pm-1:00pm, Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty webinar on death penalty developments in the past year. Register at: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfdCv4or9fHDDO1dxODmA8YQcKuqDrVONly_49Z4P9J-Gm6KQ/viewform

Notices

Roses in December, video documentary on the death of Jean Donovan, one of the four church women assassinated by the Salvadoran military in 1980. The focus is on the unsatisfactory response by the Salvadoran and United States governments. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jSn6mjU10PQ&list=PLmRZkjteE-wcfE_I-NsB979FgSqXWOfin

Killed in El Salvador, on the 1980 assassination of four church women by the Salvadoran military. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8E_-VwWXKLU

The Matter of Negusie, an asylum case in which Attorney General Barr ruled on the relevance of forcing a conscientious objector to persecute. Mr. Negusie, from Eritrea, was conscripted and forced to serve as a prison guard in a facility in which a minority group was imprisoned and tortured. Barr ruled that the conscience of Mr. Negusie did not matter and that he could be denied asylum because he participated in a persecution. Sara Ramey (Migrant enter of Human Rights).

Access at:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLqH93UgLhMaFG0XdMMzz4g?view_as=subscriber

Online Resource for families or small groups: If you're needing some social interaction with depth, more than just listening to zoom webinars, longing for the social time that used to happen before and after Mass, consider using the *Maryknoll Weekly Reflection Guides*. Gather as family or small group and use these guides in Facetime, Skype, Zoom etc. This an easy online structure with prayer, an introductory theme, a link to the Sunday Readings and some reflection questions to guide group conversation. Using the SeeJudgeAct methodology, you

will be led as a group to consider where, in light of the shared reflection, the Spirit is calling you this week. The Global Solidarity charism of the Maryknoll family will feed you spiritually for these challenging times. Find the Guides in both Spanish and English at:

<https://mission.maryknoll.us/reflection-guides-ordinary-time>

Second Reading (First Thessalonians 5:16-24)

Unlike many of the books of the New Testament given the heading "Letter," the authentic letters of Paul were real letters. The reading for this Sunday comes at the end of one of these letters. It is a concluding series of encouragements before signing off. "Rejoice always, pray continuously, giving thanksgiving for all things!"

Rejoice—The Christian God is a generous and compassionate God; there is no reason to be angry at a God Who is not angry. Certainly there are short term irritants in life, but underlying everything there is hope and confidence.

Pray continuously—this is not a matter of saying lots of prayers but of sensing the presence of God, which is limitless. As the saying goes: Sometimes use words.

Giving thanksgiving for all things—everything is an opportunity for a contemplative kind of prayer.

Third Reading (John 1:6-8, 19-28)

Since the *Gospel of Mark* is much shorter than *Matthew* and *Luke*, it is occasionally supplemented in the Sunday readings by passages from the *Johannine Gospel* in the second, Markan, year of the three-year liturgical cycle of gospel readings. One such supplement occurs on the Third Sunday of Advent. In the Second Sunday reading Mark had placed the Christian tradition squarely in the prophetic rather than the ritual Hebrew tradition. He had written that Jesus' ministry originated in that of John the Baptizer, a first century prophet (social critic).

The *Johannine Gospel* begins with a theological poem: "In *Genesis* there was speech, and the speech was to God, and the speech was God" (John 1:1, translating *logos* as "speech" rather than "word" in order to make the subsequent part of the verse understandable). The first of the passages that form today's

reading actually interrupts that poem. My own theory is that the final author/editor of the *Johannine Gospel* preserved earlier Christian writings relevant to his gospel in side bars, much as we might place pertinent quotations in footnotes today. When the ancients had copies made, not having photocopy machines, they had a reader recite the text aloud to a room of scribes taking dictation, and the scribes wrote the side bars into the main text as they heard it.

“A man named John came to be sent by God. He came for testimony, so that he may give testimony about the light, so that all would believe through it. He was not the light, but to testify to the light. The true light, which shines on all people, was coming into the world.” So begins the side bar, with a statement about the nature of prophecy. Prophecy testifies about the light that shines on all people. If some testimony shines on only some people, it is not true light. Whatever or whoever casts a shadow that leaves some people in darkness is obscuring the light and is therefore not true prophecy. One thinks of a line from the *Charter of Compassion*, “...any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate.”

The second part of the reading (John 1:19-28) begins the narrative written by the final author/editor, following the introductory poem; it is this passage that cued in the side bar that had interrupted the poem. The narrative begins, “And this is the testimony of John, when the Judeans sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’” Maybe we should read this, “Who are you?”

Prophecy raises the whole question of clericalism. The priests and Levites from Jerusalem and their scriptures preserved ancient truth. The Christian author responsible for our text acknowledges this by citing the Hebrew Bible—“In *Genesis* there was speech.” The poem that begins the *Johannine Gospel* parallels the Creation Poem in *Genesis*, which begins, “In the beginning God...” (*Genesis* 1:1), and early on adds, “and God spoke...” (*Genesis* 1:3). But if it is *these* scriptures, *theirs*, that preserve the ancient truth, any other is suspect: “Why then do you baptize if you are not the messiah, Elijah, or the prophet?” Prophet John harkens back to part of the tradition that the clergy seemed less concerned with.

Poem

Beliefs and Faith

What a difference.
One is about what.
What's out there?
The other is about who.
Who are we becoming?

One puts its trust in authority.
The other in experience.

We believe in atoms
not because we saw but
that's what our teachers said.
Like they told us in the army:
*"There are three ways to do things.
The right way, the wrong way, the army way.
Do it the army way."*

That worked.
Saved us the fuss and bother
of figuring it out for ourselves.
Secure as oysters in their shells.

But faith. That is another matter.
There we undergo happenings
like hope and fear, love and hate,
by living them.

It's facing truths, so powerful
that we surrender to them.

Developments that envelop us,
change us, so we can never go back
to whatever we were before.

Now and then they make us deep.
We feel a freedom to risk.

Even mistakes become
windows to see,
doors for going through
to brave out our becoming.

Tom Keene and Muse
January 17, 2019

Meditation on Bad Religion

Anthony J. Blasi

Science and Bad Religion

It is not a novel suggestion that religion can be bad. The basic insight is that the elevating dimension of faith tends to give its cultural and institution embodiments an undeserved halo. Religion is, of course, necessary for faith insofar as the transmission of and perseverance of faith unexpressed and not institutionalized is unlikely. But that necessity does not diminish the tension between religion and faith. I want to point to some contemporary patterns of bad religion, signs of the times as it were.

One example is a denial of God's creative activity. Many say that they believe in God, maker of all things, but in practice proceed as if God were not a creator. The contemporary form of this denial is a mistrust of science. The natural world that God created reflects the mind of its Creator; human observation can lead humans to the *ratio* (reason, rationality) that is embodied in nature. There remain those things that cannot be observed beyond nature, matters about the divine that remain as unknowns that require revelation ("mysteries"), but that fact does not invalidate the divine work can be known through observation and reason. Humans live in a moral relationship to their envioning world; they are responsible for what they can control in that world. If they can save someone from a natural disaster, they are obligated to set about saving that person. Knowledge of the natural world is an indispensable asset in such responsible action. Contemporary examples include basic knowledge about the spread of

disease, the effectiveness of vaccinations, and the effects of burning of fossil fuels on the atmosphere and climate. A religion that would encourage ignorance by associating itself with anti-intellectualism, a mistrust of genuine science, is bad religion.

In theory, one could reason that a fundamentalist version of Christianity, by its rejection of the evolution of species, would motivate people to reject natural science altogether. One could similarly reason that the incompatibility of a literalist reading of the Creation Poem at the beginning of *Genesis* on the one hand and geologists' finding that the earth is much older than *Genesis* would lead one to believe on the other, leads to a rejection of natural science. That does not seem to be the case, however. Most people do not think such things through. What happens is that a commitment to a fundamentalist community, more than to a fundamentalist belief system, leads to a suspicion of people outside the community. Maintaining in-group solidarity requires an out-group antipathy when the bases for the in-group solidarity are not all that salient. This can be particularly true in a secularized society.

Shrinking to a Religious Enclave

When in-group solidarity becomes an end in itself, its religious manifestation takes the form of exclusions of "others" on the grounds that they are morally inferior, tinged with sinfulness of some kind. This readily leads to racism, ethnic prejudice, and expressions of in-group supremacy. Such is often sensed as crude, and people are not generally open about it because they have internalized the general social disapproval of such attitudes. Consequently one seldom finds manifest hostility, though repressed hostility can still be at work.

There is a concomitant to such repressed hostility that is not itself repressed: a disinclination to feel responsible for preserving the dignity of people who belong to out-groups. Evil is consequently limited to personal sins of commission. Omitting any sense of responsibility to act for the resolution of social problems become characteristic of one's moral theology. It is as if the whole law of God were summed up in the Ten Commandments, especially in a series of prohibitions. With such a malformed ethic, one would never be troubled by matters of social justice.

A person, in reality, is not an isolated monad. A person carries about in imagination an entire world of others, in the same way that one carries about in one's mind an entire civilization. Without others, there is no self, only a biological organism. One discovers self and other simultaneously; if there is a self, there is a

not-self, and vice-versa. To construct an ethic relevant to self-alone is a contrivance that has a falsity as its very basis, a self without others. It is necessary, on the basis of a genuine experience, to discover an ethic of self-with-other. But there is more: if one limits one's others who are with oneself in consciousness to a small number who happen to inhabit one's in-group, a variation is made on the basic falsehood of an isolated self: a group egoism. The individuals become fused together, as it were, aided by a mandatory uniformity, so that they comprise a new group-self, a selfish plural.

The ego not giving due moral significance to the other impoverishes itself. There is an instructive image that the American philosopher George Herbert Mead attributed to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: a three-dimensional constellation of spheres, each one of which has a reflective surface. Each sphere has the same constellation mirrored on its surface, but from a different position. Thus the mirrored image is different on each sphere, despite mirroring the same constellation. The more spheres in the constellation, the richer and more unique each sphere would be. Even in such a world of monads, removing some "others" renders a given monad deprived of images and lessened in individuality. So too with the moral life of persons; removing concern with others reduces the power of imagery, imagination. And it reduces uniqueness. A religion that cuts off concern with others, with the wider perspective, lessens its adherents.

Elitism

Religion can institutionalize faith in an organized social club. This can result in being dismissive of the moral worth of non-members. Moreover, the authority system of the club itself may exaggerate its own importance, resulting in an authoritarianism and internal intolerance of difference and creativity. Rules replace the procedure of natural law, wherein the individual member uses observation and reason in the making of personal decisions. Tradition, the history of thousands of individuals independently making decisions, comes to be stifled; rather than allowing individuals to appreciate the wisdom of past decisions, tradition is allowed room only to interpret rules. Obviously, the rules cannot change with circumstances without jeopardizing the authority that continues to impose them. Consequently change will come only with disruption and disjuncture, which sufficiently frighten authorities to make them fear any further updating.

Individuals who accommodate themselves an organization that is, in that manner, too crystalized might internalize the authoritarianism that maintains the

fragile system. They become authoritarian themselves. If they engage the world outside the club at all, they would want the club's form of authoritarianism replicated in the world and their own rules imposed on people in the world without. The legalistic ethos would be promoted externally even as it stifles internally.

The Club would be an elite, and within it would have an elite. Responsibility would flow upward, and of course would be theologically legitimated. This is commonly referred to as clericalism. No theology, however, can adjust to the moment-by-moment emergent circumstances that arise in daily human life. Consequently it needs to be supplemented by a practical psychology that deems compliance and acquiescence virtuous. This would have the state of being manageable codified as a normal and healthy condition. Lacking genuine theological sources, the ethic of manageability is imported from the business world, at least from that aspect of the business world that is characterized by mass production and restricted decision-making on the part of employees.

The internal elite system sets in motion a political dynamic in which individuals compete with one another for positions. We know this as church politics. While in class society the mass of the many wish to be counted among the number of the few, the limited sphere of the religious organization contains a similar ambition for advancement. The resultant ethic is one of party spirit and loyalty, alliances of convenience, and of course denunciatory tactics.

Links

Pax Christi International

<http://www.paxchristi.net/>

Pax Christi U.S.A.

<http://www.paxchristiusa.org>

Pax Christi Texas

<http://www.paxchristitexas.org>

Pax Christi Dallas

<http://www.Paxchristidallastx.org>

Pax Christi San Antonio

<http://www.paxchristisa.org>

Marianist Social Justice Collaborative

www.msjc.net

Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, International JPIC Committee

<http://saccvi.blogspot.com/>

San Antonio Peace Center

<http://www.sanantoniopace.center>

Texas Catholic Campaign to End the Death Penalty

www.txccedp.org

Dialogue Institute of San Antonio

www.thedialoginstitute.org/san-antonio/

Climate Change

www.creation-care.com

Migrant Center for Human Rights

<https://Migrantcenter.org>

Catholic Books Review

<http://catholicbooksreview.org>