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Commentary & Opinion
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Atheists and Humanists launch Freethought Equity Fund PAC
Atheists and Humanists hope to increase their influence in politics with the launch of the Freethought Equality Fund, a new political action committee for nonbelievers. Page 4

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The Rev. Samuel Phillips' diary was lost for nearly 20 years when it was discovered in an old burlap bag. The historic document has now been digitized. Page 11

Oldest Jewish Prayer Book on display

Five things we learned about Pope Francis

Pontiff shares his heart on critical issues of faith and practice

(RNS) Pope Francis' comments this week on everything from gays to abortion (less talk, more mercy), the hierarchy (be pastors, not bureaucrats) and religious faith (doubt is part of belief) continue to reverberate through the church and the media.

Here are five broader insights that this wide-ranging interview revealed about Francis — and why they will be keys to reading his pontificate, and perhaps the future of Catholicism.

He is not a hermit, and he reads his own press

The great danger for popes, like presidents and other world leaders, is that they can become isolated from the real lives of ordinary people beyond their gilded bubble. Some pledge to stay connected but ultimately fail, like John Paul II. Some enjoy the isolation, like Benedict XVI, which leads to losing touch.

Francis has done more than any pope to remain "normal," as he puts it — calling friends and

strangers alike on his personal cellphone, and living in the Vatican guesthouse rather than the "inverted funnel" of the large rooms and small doorways inside the Apostolic Palace, as he said this week. "People can come only in dribs and drabs, and I cannot live without people," he said. "I need to live my life with others."

He also knows what is going on in the church. He noted that he has been "reprimanded" by his right flank for not talking about their favorite issues all the time — and he doesn't care. Indeed, the whole interview was directed as much to his fellow bishops as to the wider church and world, and it revealed some serious political savvy behind the big smile.

"See everything; turn a blind eye to much; correct a little," he said, reviving a favorite phrase of Pope John XXIII.

The point is that he sees everything, and seems determined to maintain his own listening posts.

He is a Jesuit forever

In a blog post that sought

Media Review: Al-Jazeera America lives up to its unbiased promise in USA

BY REM RIEDER

(USA TODAY) Before its Aug. 20 launch, officials at Al-Jazeera America emphasized that, despite its Middle Eastern roots and ownership, the fledgling cable news network would be aimed squarely at a U.S. audience.

Guess they weren't kidding. A new study of cable news coverage of the Syria crisis released found that the new kid on the block covered the fast-moving story of President Obama's threat to strike the civil war-torn nation much the way its cable rivals did.

The report, released Monday (Sept. 16) by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, covers the period from Aug. 26, when Secretary of State John Kerry accused the Syrian government of using chemical weapons against its own people, until Aug. 31, when Obama said he would

seek congressional approval for his plans to punish the forces of Syrian leader Bashar Assad.

The study looked at coverage on Fox News Channel, CNN, MSNBC, BBC America and Al-Jazeera America.

Before Al-Jazeera America went on the air, it was an open question as to whether the network, owned by the oil-rich Persian Gulf emirate Qatar, would feature traditional U.S.-centric news or offer up a more global perspective along the lines of the BBC. Al-Jazeera Arabic, the original Al-Jazeera outlet, bears little resemblance to an American cable channel and is widely known for airing Osama bin Laden "death to America" videos.

During the first international megastory since it made its debut, Al-Jazeera America "delivered content that resembled U.S. cable content,"

See AL-JAZEERA on page 9

N.C. clergy seek release of Senate report on torture

BY AMANDA GREEN

WILMINGTON, N.C. (RNS) Citing the need for transparency in the U.S. record on human rights, nearly 200 clergy and religious leaders from North Carolina are seeking the public release of a 6,000-page Senate intelligence report on U.S. torture of terrorism detainees after 9/11.

The letter, dated Aug. 27 and released to the media on Thursday (Sept. 19), was sent from the North Carolina Council of Churches in Raleigh to Sen. Richard Burr, a North Carolina Republican who sits on the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

The letter, signed by 18 bishops, including the leaders of both of the state's Catholic dioceses, stated that in light of conflicts in Syria and around

the Middle East, transparency on U.S. torture practices was needed.

"Our relations with the Muslim world have deteriorated, and the major reason is that our credibility on human rights is under question," the letter states. "The U.S. does not condone torture, but torture has been done by our citizens and in our country's name. Our national security would be improved by restoring the world's respect for U.S. integrity on human rights and adherence to the rule of law."

Officials at Burr's office said the senator had not seen the letter and could not comment on the actions of the intelligence committee.

The council's letter referenced

See TORTURE on page 4



Pope Francis raised some conservative eyebrows with comments he made during an interview in mid-September, stating his opinion on several important issues. RNS photo

to downplay the significance of Francis' interview, the Rev. John Zuhlsdorf, a conservative commentator popularly known as "Father Z," wrote that Pope Francis is "formerly a Jesuit." Yet nothing could be further from the truth.

Francis — the former Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio — was ordained a Jesuit priest as a young man, spent his entire adult life immersed in the teachings and dynamic of the order founded by St. Ignatius Loyola, and returns at almost every point in the 12,000-word interview to his Ignatian roots. He even gave the exclusive to a Jesuit journal-

ist from a Jesuit magazine.

Reading the interview is like getting a primer on Ignatian spirituality, on an openness to the world and "finding God in all things." But he boils it down to one word: "Discernment."

"My choices, including those related to the day-to-day aspects of life, like the use of a modest car, are related to a spiritual discernment that responds to a need that arises from looking at things, at people and from reading the signs of the times. Discernment in the Lord guides me in my way of governing."

As the Rev. Thomas Reese,

a Jesuit and an analyst for National Catholic Reporter, put it: "While reading the interview, I felt like I was in a Jesuit living room having a conversation with a brother." Francis is letting everyone else in on those conversations now; listen and you will get a better understanding of where this pontificate is headed.

Authoritarianism is dead, consultation lives

When the cardinals gathered last March to elect a successor to Benedict XVI, many Catholics were praying for a reformer

See POPE on page 10

U.S. asks Supreme Court to review Hobby Lobby's birth control mandate challenge

BY SARAH PULLIAMBAILEY

(RNS) Federal officials have asked the U.S. Supreme Court to review the government mandate that private companies offer employees birth control coverage despite the business owner's moral objections, with the company at the center of the suit owned by billionaire evangelical Christians.

Hobby Lobby's lawsuit has been one of the most high profile of 60-some cases involving the Obama administration's contraceptive mandate. The arts and crafts chain was founded by David Green, whom Forbes called "the biblical billionaire backing the evangelical movement."

In June, the Obama administration issued final rules for the mandate that requires most employers to provide contraception at no cost. While there are exemptions for religious groups and affiliated institutions, there are no carve-outs for private businesses with religious owners.

Opponents of the mandate say that they will be forced to provide coverage they find morally abhorrent. Alliance Defending Freedom attorneys filed a federal lawsuit against the Obama administration Friday (Sept. 20) on behalf of four Christian universities in Oklahoma, where Hobby Lobby is also based.

Now that two different federal courts have issued contradictory opinions on the mandate, the issue is near certain to be decided by the Supreme Court.

Thursday's (Sept. 19) petition from the Obama administration to the high court raises the issue central in the 1993



David and Barbara Green, founders of Hobby Lobby. As devout Christians, the Green family believes that "it is by God's grace and provision that Hobby Lobby has endured." Therefore, the Greens seek to honor God by "operating their company in a manner consistent with Biblical principles."

Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which says the government "shall not substantially burden a person's exercise of religion" unless that burden is the least restrictive means to further a compelling governmental interest.

The administration is asking the Supreme Court to decide that for-profit corporations cannot deny their employees the health coverage of contraceptives to which the employees are otherwise entitled by federal law, based on the religious objections of the corporation's owners.

"The United States government is taking the remarkable position that private individuals lose their religious freedom when they make a living," said Kyle Duncan, general counsel of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty and lead lawyer for Hobby Lobby.

"We're confident that the Supreme Court will reject the government's extreme position and hold that religious liberty is for everyone — including people who run a business."

In June, a federal court in Oklahoma ruled in Hobby Lobby See HOBBY LOBBY on page 7

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Acts Ministry, Inc announces the launch of a new Christian TV network. Acts Television Network (ATN) is available now on the Internet. ATN will bring you some unique programming, including: Christian talk, teaching, Branson entertainment, and locally produced shows not found anywhere else. Scan the code to see some clips of the shows. www.actsmediagroup.com/tv

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Commentary

Faith and Culture: *Reflections over a fire pit*

I turned 54 in September. My wife bought me a fire pit for my birthday; one of those portable things with a mesh lid that you can put a fire in on your patio.

A cool September evening seemed the perfect time to try out the fire pit; so, being the good Boy Scout that I was, I carefully arranged the wood -- smallest to largest, stacked in a perfect teepee -- and poured on a cup of gasoline and tossed in a match. There's nothing like instant fire in my book.

There is something about fire that is mesmerizing. As I watched the fire I began to reflect on the very nature of fire itself.

I realized that fire, like many things in life, is a dichotomy -- that is it there are two ways to look at it. The same fire that warms a cold person, saving

their life, can get out of control and burn a house or 10,000 acres of property.

Fire is not good or bad - fire is fire. It does what fire does; it consumes things, and we need to have a healthy respect for that.

A fire, properly respected, can bring warmth and cheer. It creates light and heat. It provides protection and allows us to prepare food. Fire is, and always has been, a gathering point of social fellowship. There is that element of fire that is warm and comfortable and relaxing in a very real emotional sense.

And yet, a proper understanding of fire brings a respectable fear. Fire is something to be careful with. It is not good to be casual with fire. As the old saying goes, "If you



Steve Highlander
Managing Editor RN-R,
play with fire you are likely to get burned."

As I reflected on these things I started to think about how many times the Bible refers to God using a metaphor of fire.

"Our God is a consuming fire," says it clearest. How are we to take this -- in a strictly negative way? I think not. If you reflect fire you see that fire is what it is -- just like God.

When properly respected, fire is a tremendous blessing and advantage to humanity. Not so much when it isn't re-

spected.

God is no different. The Bible tells us, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Fear meaning awesome respect - not cringing terror.

As we learn to properly respect God in our individual lives, families and society, the blessings of that respect are displayed.

The opposite is true also. When we fail to respect God and treat Him carelessly, we can get burned, and a lot of destruction can come from it. Not so much because God is punishing us, as much as it is the consequences of failure to follow the instructions and warnings of God.

Remember, the effect of fire, to some degree, is in how people use it and relate to it.

Does this mean that God

is an angry, destructive God, ready to toast anyone who doesn't make Him happy? NO, not at all! By using the analogy of fire to illustrate some characteristics of God the Bible forces us to compare the two and draw some conclusions.

God's nature is to consume that which is not like Him. When we yield to God, He purges out of our life and society those things which are detrimental to us. When we fail to respect Him, the consequences can sometimes spin out of our control and become very destructive to us and our society.

Dr. Steve Highlander is a pastor and author. He holds a doctorate in Pastoral Theology and is a Certified Christian Counselor. He can be contacted through his website at www.c3ministries.com

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The vision of the Real News-Review is to be a newspaper that will bring attention to the power and influence of religion in today's world. Acts Ministry is a distinctively Christian organization seeking to present the news of all religions in a professional manner while, at the same time, maintaining a Christian perspective.

We believe that we can report the news with accuracy even though we see events through our paradigm as Christians.

The stories and opinions expressed in **The Real News - Review** do not necessarily reflect the opinions and beliefs of Acts Ministry, Inc. its board or larger body of associates.

To suggest or submit a story or to write the editor contact Steve Highlander at editor@actsmediagroup.com.

A View From Jordan Creek

Down on the farm - part 2



Virgil Hill
RN-R Columnist

still serve as the social center of many areas, it is also true that memberships have declined along with population.

The recent closure of the First Christian Church in a thriving nearby town, which was a pillar of that community and home to many generations of members, gives stark evidence that even well-established congregations are subject to significant decline and disappearance.

In much of rural America, churches are served by bivocational pastors or led by elders. Some, especially in the mainline denominations, are served by pastors beginning their professional careers before "moving up" to urban areas. Others are served by a series of "supply preachers" or similarly named figures who come and go quickly.

Some years ago, I willingly filled that role but declined the opportunity to become a "Sunday-only pastor" for such congregations because I found the term to be both an oxymoron and objectionable. One can be a preacher or entertainer one

day per week but not a pastor. Treating rural parishioners in such a second-class manner ought to be unacceptable.

Our collective history is grounded in rural life. As Christians, we claim an agricultural heritage that began in the Garden and was repeatedly reflected in the parables of Jesus. Our charge to be faithful stewards of creation is directly tied to the land. Separately, as Americans, we are the beneficiaries of pioneers and homesteaders who moved across the continent from the original farming settlements of the Atlantic coast.

My own story is principally the result of my French Huguenot, English Baptist and Scots-Irish émigré forebears. All of them were farmers in their native countries and became farmers here, like the majority of Americans during that period. (My Cherokee lineage is obviously a rather different matter.)

For many readers of these words, I'm not just "preaching to the choir" but I'm up in the choir loft with you. I strongly believe that the church must respond to the challenges now uniquely facing rural communities and do so as a priority, not an afterthought.

(To be concluded next month.) Virgil J. Hill is a lifelong Ozarker and activist and is an ordained minister with Acts Ministry.

America's Moral Compass

The so-called wall separating church and state



Dee Wampler
RN-R Columnist

ordered an "accommodation" between the two, not a total separation. Don't get confused. Some Liberals want a religious cleansing and have a hostility and bigotry toward religion and people of faith. They want to take Jesus out of all influence on public life. Any views of Christians are seen as "religious," and religious views are to be kept in church buildings and behind the doors of our homes lest we somehow violate cer-

tain contemporary notions of the separation of church and state. They say Christians are not expected to have any voice in government. If Christians speak out today, they are attacked and criticized. The secular advocates want "violators" pushed back to the private sphere where their ideas cannot impact anyone, but themselves. Secularism is becoming religion's replacement, and it is bringing with it a breakdown of the moral, spiritual, and intellectual fiber that Christianity has held together for over 2000 years.

Dee Wampler is an Author, Defense Attorney, Former Prosecutor, and a Native of Springfield, MO. He believes America needs a moral compass and advocates an honest look at America's Christian History.

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Acts Ministry, Inc. and the Real News-Review

BY PAUL COLLINS, Publisher RN-R SPRINGFIELD, MO - The Real News-Review newspaper is a part of the global outreach of a ministry headquartered in Springfield, MO. Begun in 1993, Acts Ministry is a non-profit, trans-denominational independent organization using several means to promote their mission statement which is, "Unity, In Christ, Through The Holy Spirit."

The vision of the Real News-Review is to be a newspaper that will bring attention to the power and influence of religion in today's world. We believe this can be accomplished by utilizing the print media to report religion in the news. Acts Ministry is a distinctively Christian organization seeking to present the

news of all religions in a very professional manner while, at the same time, maintaining a Christian perspective.

We believe that we can report the news with accuracy even though we see events through our paradigm as Christians.

Acts Ministry accepts no liability for the accuracy of news received via the wire services or submitted by others, and we cannot be held responsible for any statements made by reporters whether they are international, national or regional.

While reporting the news, we do not want to neglect our opportunity to present Christ to the reader. It is for that reason that you will find references to Jesus, how to receive him as Lord and Savior, and

live your life in accordance with his teachings. Please take note of the 3rd chapter of the Gospel of John. Embedded in the conversation between Nicodemus (a religious man of high standing) and Jesus, you find what may be the best known scripture verse in the Bible, John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (NRSV) The word "may" is used twice. If you believe, you "may" not perish (in any way) but you "may" have eternal life.

If you want information about the simple plan of salvation, you can contact Acts Ministry by going to the website at www.actsministry.org. Or, you can call 417-886-0223.

The Evidence of Faith's Substance

How to make sure you don't go to hell

We in America understand the phrase "Over my dead body." It's an English expression that someone says when they mean there is absolutely no way a person will allow something. It's the same as saying "no way." This is exactly what God the Father is saying to mankind with the Cross.

For anyone to end up in hell, they have to literally trample over the dead body of Jesus Christ, God's only Son that He sent to be our Savior in three distinct ways: 1) save us from ourselves -- no one can deny they have morally failed at one time and need a solution to the guilt they carry inside; 2) save us to a personal relationship with God, who promises to completely forgive each one of us by wiping away that guilt we willingly carry like a heavy weight on our backs, or as a ball and chain shackled to our ankles; and 3) save us from the just punishment we all deserve if we are intent on trusting in ourselves to carrying our guilt and refuse to trust Christ, who



Ed Croteau
RN-R Columnist

has already paid for it.

Why do you think Jesus Christ told us in John 8:32,36 that only He has the power to free us from our guilt and the penalty it brings? "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free... if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" Why would they willingly reject such a free offer?

But this is America, the land of "I can do anything I put my mind to." How dare Jesus claim only He can 'save' me, that I choose hell because Jesus says

"no way" I'll go there if I allow Him to have any say in my decision. Well, listen to the Bible. "Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?" (Hebrews 10:29)

God says I am "trampling over His body," treating His sacrifice as a "common thing" and "insulting God's grace" when I reject the free gift of Jesus Christ and trust in myself.

Ed Croteau is a resident of Lee's Summit and hosts a weekly study in Lee's Summit called "Faith: Substance and Evidence".

Prayer does not change God, but it changes him who prays.

~ Soren Kierkegaard

As an avid newspaper reader, I have learned to read between the lines to ferret out anything that resembles the truth. I also read news online, and it, too, requires a discerning look into the story behind the story. Sometimes I feel like a mind reader trying to determine the writer's message and its purpose. Was the purpose to report facts, or was the intent to persuade the reader to accept the writer's point of view and opinion?

A lawyer who was my friend, told me something that has stayed with me even after his death nearly 20 years ago. He said that in order to understand completely a document you had to read and define ev-

ery word from the beginning of each sentence until the end; then you needed to start at the end and work your way to the front using the same method of checking. When you believe you have the truth in that one sentence, you need to lift it up and look under it. Extreme? Yes, perhaps. But he made his point.

I am known by my close associates to be a "stickler" for accurate communication. There is no doubt that misunderstandings are caused by misunderstandings! Clarity in communication is a vital part of our ability to function effectively in business --- or in other areas of life and relationships.

Whether watching the news, or reading it in newspapers, magazines, or on the Internet, checking the real message can get you close to the truth. You probably will not get the whole truth, but coming close is better than missing it by a mile.

I am not a conspiracy theorist, nor do I look for an enemy around every corner. Paranoia about social, political, and economic issues will not solve problems. The sense of being targeted by authorities --- in or out of government --- is the fertile soil for confrontations that lead to the quagmire of ineffectiveness. The only changes that make a difference are those made by thinkers.

Seasons of Reflections:

Being still can lead to a quiet mind and knowing God

Have you ever just stopped everything and gotten very still? Do you find it hard not to be doing anything? If you are able to physically stop moving for a while, do you find that your mind races making mental notes of all you need to be doing? What do you "do" when you consciously stop all physical and mental activity?

Have you stopped long enough to realize that by not "being still" that we miss a blessing of peace? "Be still and know that I am God." Psalm 64:10 tells us that we will KNOW that He is God if we will be still. Being still is



LeAnn Kennedy
President, Acts Ministry

more than the ceasing of physical activity, but mental stillness is much harder to harder to achieve. It takes determination to actively block out messages from the world telling us what we should be doing, what we

need, and when we need it.

Being still requires us to slow down. The enemy of our souls has increased the pace of the world because he does not want us to know the Lover of our souls. "Be still and know that I am God." I believe that that KNOWING is a knowing in the heart, not just a knowing in the mind. When God supernaturally translates or moves knowledge from our minds into our hearts, real freedom and peace is the result.

Excerpted from Ms Kennedy's book Seasons of Reflection published by Acts Press. Ms Kennedy is President of Acts Ministry.

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Mind and Spirit: The Passion Ploy

It is so "PC" to rave on about how passionate we are about our cause, or our church, or our job, or even "life" in general. Even if we're not really passionate about anything, we have to pretend to be if we want to get that job position or fit in with the right crowd. Seriously, with as much distraction and just plain busy-ness modern day life throws at us, who has the energy or time to be that passionate?

Don't get me wrong: If you get me on the right topic, I can be passionate about it. When I start in about the grace of God, I am passionate! When I talk about what an amazing person my husband is, I am passionate! However, in all honesty, I don't live there. My mundane life doesn't inspire outbursts of emotional ecstasy. I have known people who are energetic, charismatic, passionate people, and you want to be around them... catch what they have. But, get real, people- you don't want to live with them because they wear you OUT!

The Bible indicates that the most important command from God is to love Him with all our hearts, mind, soul, and strength, and that the second



Dr. Brooke Highlander
Associate Editor, RN-R

is to love our neighbor as our self (Luke 10:27). If we were to interpret that in a modern context, we would have to assume that we thought of nothing else but God, night and day, that we talked of nothing else, that we spent all of our emotional and mental energy furthering His cause and His kingdom, and engaging in intense worship. In fact, I would like to be that person! The truth is though, that while I have moments and even days where I am like that, I can't sustain it, and maybe I shouldn't.

If my husband was that enthusiastic about me, all the time, I would be highly annoyed. I love that he is passionate about me, and thinks I'm lovely, smart, and talented, but I also love those evenings where we just sit together and read, or watch a movie, or

Brooke Highlander is Associate Editor of the Real News - Review. She is an ordained minister, an applied psychologist, and a certified Christian counselor.

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World Religion

COMMENTARY: Don’t surrender Islam to the Islamists

Muslim Doctor encourages Muslims to resist a radical interpretation of Islam

By QANTA AHMED

c. 2013 Religion News Service – “The mosques are our barracks, the domes our helmets, the minarets our bayonets and the faithful our soldiers.”

This was the Islamist poem quoted by the mayor of Istanbul, Turkey, in December 1997. Charged with using inflammatory speech, he was ejected from office and sentenced to jail by the Ankara High Court.

both the violent kind and their political brethren — preach intolerance. They seek power by any means available to make all others conform to their rules. They are equally at war with moderate Muslims and people of other faiths.

At the same time, Islam is cleaving along ancient, sectarian lines. The two main branches of the faith — Sunni and Shiite — are separating and preparing for conflict. This is happen-

dominated government tyrannizes the Sunni minority.

In nuclear-armed Pakistan, Sunni Islamist policies infect the constitution, creating a society that legally persecutes minorities. There and in neighboring Afghanistan, jihadists induct ever more children into the service of the Taliban. In the Northwest Frontier and elsewhere, the Pakistani Taliban execute vaccination workers, casting them as soldiers fighting for secularism. One result: Polio, once near eradication, is again crippling children.

Who are these people? All Islamists are Muslims, but most Muslims are not Islamists.

Islamists claim to manifest an official Islam, concealing their totalitarian ideologies in a veil of faith. Though Islamists can be violent or nonviolent, they all wage war from an entrenched position of anti-Western de-secularization. They claim ownership of the public space by divine right, suffocating everyone else. Today, whether in Egypt, Iraq or Pakistan, they seek to extinguish the few Christians in their midst. Tomorrow Islamists will turn more of their hatred on non-Islamist Muslims.

Unlike other Muslims, Islamists are masters at manipulating the masses, preying on ignorance of Islam and pitching a carefully cultivated populist narrative of virulently anti-Western, anti-Zionist, anti-Semitic, anti-secular propaganda that arouses the uneducated and silences the naive.

In the West, they are unwittingly aided by the political left. Fearful of inducing Islamophobia, it tries to suppress debate about the forces driving the radicalization of Islam.

This has contributed to a decade of warfare waged by America in a vacuum of knowledge about sectarian forces within Islam.

The result is tragically predictable. The Arab Awakening is on life support because Islamists seized the brief democratic opening that it created before institutions could be built to guarantee pluralism and

Today, that mayor, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is prime minister of Turkey. During a decade in office, he has slowly but inexorably pushed secular Turkey, a member of NATO, toward an unabashedly Islamist future.

As a Muslim, I refuse to give up Islam to the Islamists. So should others who believe in a deeply pluralistic Islam of the sort my Indian-born grandparents taught. It is the only path to peaceful resolution of inevitable religious differences, within Islam and with other faiths.

Yet today pluralist manifestations of Islam are contracting. Never before has there been a time when Islam has been more threatened from within. That threat today is twofold: ideological and sectarian.

Ideologically, Islamists —

ing physically, as in Iraq, where once-peaceful mixed neighborhoods are reorganizing as Shiite or Sunni enclaves. And it's happening psychologically, as intolerant Islamists on both sides stoke fear and isolation.

This is giving birth to an unprecedented age of conflict, waged in the name of Islam, by Islamists who corrupt the true meaning of the faith.

In Syria, Shiite-linked Alawites are pitted against Sunni and Salafi extremists in a war that has killed 100,000 people. Next door, Lebanon car bombs are the latest threat poised to reignite Shiite and Sunni sectarianism.

In Egypt, Islamists, removed from power but still potent, are pitted against secular and mainstream Muslims, and “unbelievers.” In post-conflict Iraq, a deeply fragmented, Shiite-

Cosmas Shayo, diocesan chancellor. “We are depending on the police for security. They say action has been taken, but we are not satisfied since the attacks are continuing.”

Fifteen people were arrested after last week's attack on the priest, The Associated Press reported.

In February, gunmen killed the Rev. Evarist Mushi, and the Rev. Ambrose Mkenda was wounded in another gun attack, around Christmas. In November, Zanzibar Mufi secretary Sheikh Fadhil Suleiman Seroga was doused with acid.

Zanzibar President Ali

Mohamed Shein announced a \$6,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of Mwangamba's attacker.

Religious leaders link the attacks to the Islamist radical group known as “Awakening,” which is campaigning for Zanzibar's independence.

Mainland Tanganyika and the islands of Zanzibar united in 1964 to become Tanzania.

Tensions between sections of Zanzibar's majority Muslim population and its minority Christian residents have intensified in recent years. Zanzibar is a semiautonomous part of Tanzania, a nation of a little more than 48 million people.



Dr. Qanta A. Ahmed is a Muslim British physician specializing in sleep disorders. She is also an author and a newspaper columnist. As a Muslim she supports a pluralistic view of Islam as a peaceful religion. She is also pro-Israel and opposes the pressure to force Israel to give up land. Photo Courtesy http://www.qantaahmed.com

protection of minorities, which any successful democracy requires. They won't change their stripes, so democracy will fail unless Islamism is castrated. I don't know of any country in the region calling for a secular democracy, which is every Muslim's best hope against Islamism of every stripe.

There is only one way to reverse this trend. Moderate Muslims have to reclaim the dialogue and articulate the narrative honestly: Islamism is not just a regionalized, totalitarian

threat. It is universal and must be confronted, not tolerated. It must be disarmed from within the faith.

Our confrontation with the beast starts by naming its origins truthfully as from within us — our confrontation with Islamism by confronting ourselves.

If anti-Islamist Muslims do not rise to the urgent challenge, it is not only minorities who risk extinction, but Islam itself. Failing to act now invites Islamists ever inward, and one

day we will find our mosques have become their barracks, our minarets remade into their bayonets, and our fellow believers, no longer true Muslims, molded into brainwashed Islamist soldiers.

(Qanta Ahmed, author of *In the Land of Invisible Women: A Female Doctor's Journey in the Saudi Kingdom, is a Templeton-Cambridge Journalism Fellow in Science and Religion. Follow her on Twitter @Miss-Diagnosis.*)

England debates full-face veils in courtrooms

Opponents claim jurors should be able to see facial expressions

BY TREVOR GRUNDY

CANTERBURY, England (RNS) A senior judge, leading members of Parliament and human rights activists are calling for an urgent debate on the explosive issue of whether Muslim women should be allowed to wear veils when they testify in court.

The call for national debate follows Judge Peter Murphy's Sept. 16 ruling that a 22-year-old Muslim woman standing trial on charges of intimidating a witness at a north London mosque must remove her facial veil, called a niqab, when testifying so the jury can better evaluate her facial expressions.

If she refuses, the woman — known only as Defendant D — could face a prison sentence for contempt of court.

The judge's ruling came

days after Birmingham Metropolitan College overturned its ruling that students, staff and visitors must remove face coverings. The ruling followed protests by Muslims who launched a petition against the college decision, attracting 8,000 signatures in less than 48 hours.

These two cases indicate that a national debate on veils, particularly the niqab, which covers all but the eyes, is long overdue.

It is an issue that has already prompted legislation in continental Europe, most notably in France, where full facial veils were banned in public places two years ago.

France has an estimated Muslim population of six million. In Britain there are roughly 280,000 Muslims.

"Given the ever-increasing diversity of society in England and Wales, this is a question which may be expected to arise more and more frequently and to which an answer must be provided," Murphy said in his ruling. "The niqab has become the elephant in the courtroom."

He added: "I express the hope that Parliament or a higher court will review this question sooner rather than later and provide a definitive statement of the law to trial judges."

Conservative Parliament Member Philip Hollobone accused Murphy of "pandering" to the Muslim defendant.

"I am disgusted that the judge is bending over backwards to accommodate someone who clearly does not want to stick to the rules like everyone else," he said.

Italy Shocked by Affair between young Gypsy and old Priest

BY ERIC J. LYMAN

ROME (RNS) An illicit relationship that began in the confessional between an elderly Italian priest and a Gypsy woman from Romania nearly 50 years his junior resulted in more than \$460,000 in blackmail payments to keep the woman quiet, Italian newspapers reported Tuesday (Sept. 17).

The reports say the relationship started four years ago with shared personal revelations in the confessional before evolving into a sexual affair and then an extortion

racket that cost the priest at least 350,000 euros (\$462,000).

At one point, the priest is reported to have handed over his entire monthly stipend to the woman, as well as an inheritance he received years earlier.

The payments reportedly began with the aim of helping the family of the cash-strapped woman but were soon made in order to prevent her from revealing evidence of the affair.

The woman, now 32 and identified in reports only by her first name, Ramona, has been detained by authorities

on charges of extortion. The case was revealed after the now penniless 80-year-old priest filed a complaint detailing threats he received and the financial burden he suffered.

A person who answered the phone at the church where the affair started, the historic Santuario della Consolata in Turin, declined to comment. Law enforcement officials in Turin also refused to comment.

The woman is believed to be a Gypsy, also known as Roma, a nomadic ethnic group with roots across Eastern Europe.

Muslimah Word Pageant seeks to empower pious Muslim women

Opposition to the Miss World content creates a different pageant bases on different criteria - - including faith

(RNS) After hardline Islamists voiced opposition to the Miss World contest now being staged in Muslim-majority Indonesia, a rival World Muslimah beauty contest exclusively for Muslim women will announce its winner on Wednesday (Sept. 18) in the capital of Jakarta, though the U.S. candidate suddenly dropped out.

"Muslimah World is a beauty pageant, but the requirements are very different from Miss World," the pageant's founder Eka Shanti told Agence France-Presse.

"You have to be pious, be a positive role model and show how you balance a life of spirituality in today's modernized world," she said.

The better-known Miss World contest opened on Indonesia's only Hindu-majority island, Bali, on Sept. 8, but faced angry protests by Islamists who said the pageant violates their religion and must be stopped.

In response, the government said Miss World's final round to announce the winner on Sept. 28 would move from its original location near Jakarta to Bali where there is much less chance of confrontation with Islamists.

World Muslimah's 20 finalists appear on the organization's website, which allows viewers to cast their ballots by clicking a "Vote me" box under each person's photograph.

"We don't just want to shout 'no' to Miss World,"

said Shanti. "We'd rather show our children they have choices. Do you want to be like the women in Miss World? Or like those in Muslimah World?"

The event's contestants were chosen for their religious abilities, including memorization of the Quran and also public speaking, beauty, style, and fashion modeling.

Fourteen of the 20 finalists are Indonesian, and others come from Brunei, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Iran and Nigeria.

On Sept. 13, World Muslimah announced that the only U.S. finalist, Ainee Fatima from Chicago, had withdrawn from the competition.

"My father's health has not been well," Fatima wrote in a letter posted on the contest's website.

Fatima's reason was "correct" because she followed Islamic tradition, the contest said.

In addition, she said she wasn't feeling well and apparently was unable to bring a male relative, known as a "mahram," with her.

A mahram is a description for a male relative who must travel with a Muslim female to protect her chastity.

The World Muslimah pageant is a global charity event, part of World Muslimah Foundation programs to benefit hunger relief, war conflict and natural disaster, its website said.

The final ceremony and announcement of a winner was broadcast live on Indonesia's ANTV station.



The Muslimah World Pagent, an event exclusively for Muslim women, may not your typical beauty pageant, but there was still plenty of glamour and action as women from around the world competed for the title. Miss Nigeria Obabiya Aishah Ajibola took home the crown at this year's contest, which took place in Jakarta, Indonesia on Sept. 18, 2013. The annual pageant, hosted in response to the Miss World contest in Bali, seeks to empower Muslim women. Photo Source: https://www.facebook.com/WorldMuslimahFoundation/photos_stream

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Religion and Life

‘Secular safe zones’ offer campus shelter to atheist students

Some students, feeling threatened for lack of religious faith on campus, look for safe places to share views

BY KIMBERLY WILSON

(RNS) The small sticker on Professor Robert Schmidt's office door isn't just a decoration — it's a beacon of safety for students who feel they are being singled out for their lack of religious beliefs.

The blue, green, yellow and pink rectangle signals that Schmidt's office at Utah State University is a "Secular Safe Zone" — a place where students who are atheists, agnostics or just questioning their faith can go for advice about dealing with bullying, discrimination and other forms of aggression.

"Being an ally to 'create safe spaces' in which secular students can question, criticize, and discuss topics and issues important to them' feels right to me," Schmidt said from his Logan office, quoting the goals of the Secular Safe Zone program. "All students should feel safe on campus."

The Secular Safe Zone program kicked off this fall after two years of planning by the Secular Student Alliance, a national organization for nontheistic students. The program enlists "allies" like Schmidt among faculty, administrators, counselors and others on college and high school campuses who are trained in the needs of nonreligious — or "secular" — students.

So far, there are Secular Safe Zone allies at 26 college and high school campuses in 14 states, including California, Nevada, Ohio, Utah, Illinois, Florida and New York.

The program is patterned on similar safe zones for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students now found on many college campuses.

Awareness that nonreligious students need a similar program was heightened by the high-profile case of Jessica

Ahlquist, a Rhode Island student who faced death threats and public ridicule after asking that a prayer banner be removed from her public high school in 2010.

"We heard too many stories of bullying and harassment from our students and looked around for something to do," said Jesse Galef, SSA's communications director. "This seemed like the logical next step, and it seemed like there is a lot we can learn from what the LGBT community has done."

The nonreligious and LGBT campus communities have much in common, Galef said. Members of both may be closeted and want to "come out." Both may feel cut off from family and friends because of their identities. Both groups face stigma and discrimination within the broader culture.

Phil Zuckerman, a Pitzer College professor of sociology and secular studies, said pro-

as being immoral or un-American," he said. "So there is a lot of negative stereotyping that often emerges, and this can sometimes create an uncomfortable environment for secular students."

At Utah State, where Schmidt teaches, many students are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

"They have many shared experiences and traditions," Schmidt said of the Mormon students. "I have heard from some students, certainly a minority, that they feel left out because they are not LDS, that they are subtly pressured to conform, and they are left feeling very uncomfortable talking about their own spiritual foundations."

Schmidt noted that both religious and nonreligious students are "my students" and he feels protective of both. As an ally, he said, "I don't preach, I don't denigrate others, and I don't promote one world-view over another."

"That is a core directive of the program, said Lori Fazzino, a graduate student instructor and secular ally at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

"We are not trying to turn students off of religion," she said. "It is important to be neutral so they feel safe expressing all their views, not just the ones I or SSA would agree with. We have to be all inclusive to be really and truly safe."

This is not the first time nonreligious groups have piggybacked on lessons learned in the gay community. In 2011, "We Are Atheism," a video campaign aimed at letting closeted atheists know they are not alone was launched, inspired in part by the "It Gets Better" video campaign started



The Secular Safe Zone Logo, alerting students to areas on school campuses where secular discussion is encouraged and a lack of religious faith is okay.

in 2010 for closeted and bullied gay teens.

Nor is it the only refuge for those who question their faith. Earlier this year, Recovering from Religion, an international support group for former believers, launched a 24-hour hotline staffed by volunteers for religious doubters.

Galef said SSA started the program after polling its members across their 393 chapters on college and high school campuses nationwide about the impact of bullying.

No one has reported anyone using a Secular Safe Zone yet; the program is only a few weeks old. But Sarah Henry, a 17-year-old high school senior in Indiana, said her school would benefit from one. When she and other students formed a club for nonreligious students, they were bullied, threatened, shunned and their club's

fliers were torn down.

"It is incredibly hard for students to feel safe and comfortable about coming out to their friends about their lack of religious beliefs in a place where that is unusual," she said. "The Secular Safe Zone allows them to have peers and authority who know what they're going through and can help them even if they just need someone to talk to."

Religious leaders denounce child marriage in joint video in Nepal

BY RICHARD S. EHRLICH

(RNS) Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and Muslim leaders are denouncing child marriage in a new audio-video broadcast for radio, TV and Internet in Hindu-majority Nepal.

The broadcast, launched this week in the Nepali language with English subtitles, was created by three United Nations groups.

"Let's end child marriage," said Hindu priest Chintamani Yogi, standing amid Hindu pagoda shrines in the two-minute video.

In Nepal, 11 percent of girls under the age of 14 and 29 percent of girls aged 15-19 are married. Seven percent of boys are married before they turn 18, according to Hanaa Singer, Nepal's representative for the United Nations Children's Fund.

During the production's launch on Sept. 15, the spiritual leaders attended a discussion at a hotel in Kathmandu, Nepal's capital. Norway's ambassador to Nepal, Alf Arne Ramslien, was the main guest and introduced the production and discussion.

"This goes against all the conventions of human rights and international treaties, which directly or indirectly forbid the degrading and mistreatment of girls inherent

in child marriage," Singer said.

In a June report titled "Child Marriage and Violations of Girls' Rights," the New York-based Human Rights Watch recommended that the minimum age of marriage be set at 18, which it suggested is the emerging consensus of international human rights conventions.

Tiny, impoverished, land-locked Nepal is among the world's worst "top 20 'hot spots' of child marriage," Human Rights Watch said.

Child marriage "affects girls more frequently and often coincides with other rights violations, including but not limited to domestic violence and impeded access to reproductive health care and education," the organization's report said.

Girls who marry "struggle with the health effects of getting pregnant too young and too often, their lack of educa-



Young Nepalese girls like this one are often taken in marriage. Photo by Peter van der Sluijs, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

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In Nepal, 11 percent of girls under the age of 14 and 29 percent of girls aged 15-19 are married.

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Remarriage rates plunge as divorced Americans have doubts

Second marriages have dropped as much as 40 percent for some age groups as couples choose to cohabitate rather than marry

BY SHARON JAYSON

(RNS) The invitations are in the mail. Jennifer Beltz and T.J. Gurski of Commerce Township, Mich., are defying the odds — they're taking the plunge a second time.

"When I got divorced, I said, 'I'm never getting married again,'" says Beltz, 41, who works in marketing.

That sentiment seems to be quite common among those jaded by a failed first union: A new analysis of federal data provided exclusively to USA TODAY shows the USA's remarriage rate has dropped 40 percent over the past 20 years.

"Pretty much everyone, regardless of age, is less likely to get remarried than in the past," said sociologist Susan Brown, lead author of the analysis, by the National Center for Family & Marriage Research at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio.

The analysis of data comparing 2011 with 1990 shows that in 2011, just 29 of every 1,000 divorced or widowed Americans remarried, down from 50 per 1,000 in 1990; 2011 was the most recent year available for the review.

The remarriage rate has dipped for all ages, with the greatest drops among those younger than 35: a 54 percent decline among ages 20-24, and 40 percent for ages 25-34. Much of the drop is due to the rise of cohabitation and older ages for first marriage — almost age 27 for women and almost 29 for men.

"Cohabitation has opened up options for people that weren't there 20 years ago," Brown said. "It affords the benefits of marriage without the legal constraints."

A generation ago, cohabita-



Many divorced couples are choosing to blend their families outside of the confines of a traditional marriage. Studies show that remarriage has dropped significantly in the past few years. One survey of 50,000 couples taking a class on remarriage, indicated that two-thirds were over 41 and half said they were currently living together. Stock photo 123rf

tion was often called "living in sin," but that social taboo has faded. Unmarried couples of all ages are moving in together — 7.8 million, according to 2012 Census data. And 37 percent of cohabiters have been married before. Between 1990 and 2012, the percentage of unmarried couples living together more than doubled, from 5.1 percent to 11.3 percent.

Even so, it's not as if everyone previously married is foregoing the institution; almost one-third of all marriages in 2010 were remarriages, according to an earlier analysis by the Bowling Green center.

Many divorced people are hesitant to risk tying another knot.

"Marriage wasn't even in the

discussion," said David Smith, 58, who works in Internet marketing and Web design. He and partner Sue Stebbins, a business consultant, have lived together in Norwalk, Conn., for five years. Both are divorced; he has three grown kids.

"We really wanted to be liberated from anything that reminded us of our past," she said. "Rather than something outside of you giving you that commitment, it's a choice daily to form that commitment."

The decision to remarry isn't an easy one, but after 11 years of living together, Kathy Guccione, 50, of Ontario, Calif., and her fiancé Larry Lindsley, 46, are getting married on Nov. 12.

"We actually didn't want to get married again," said Guccione, whose two sons are 18 and 21. "We decided to live together and the boys live with us and we were content to stay that way."

But earlier this year, they started "talking about it back and forth" and decided to take the leap. Her sons will escort her down the aisle at the county courthouse; they'll have a party to celebrate Nov. 16.

Some couples worry about the odds of a successful remarriage, but long-term data is relatively non-existent because of federal cutbacks that stopped data collection. "There is no good, recent data on divorce among remarried couples that I know of," said marriage researcher Andrew Cherlin of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

Olson is co-author of the 2011 book "The Remarriage Blueprint," which surveyed 50,000 couples taking a class to prepare for remarriage. Two-thirds were age 41 and older, and half said they were living together.

"Cohabiting isn't going to make it easier," Olson says. "In many ways, it makes it more complicated. ... It doesn't signal to the kids 'this is permanent.'"

Sending that signal is one reason Amber Fortune, 25, of Logan, Utah, says she and fiancé Dixon Butters are getting married this fall.

Butters, 28, was married for a year and had no children. Fortune separated after five years and divorced; her daughter from that marriage just turned 4.

"I want her to know that no matter what, we're promising to stick it out," she said. "When you promise something you make it work."

(Sharon Jayson writes for USA Today)

Al-Jazeera lives up to 'unbiased' promise

Continued from front page

said Mark Jurkowitz, the Pew Research Center's associate director. "The coverage was from the U.S. perspective, (and) appeared tailored to the U.S. domestic audience."

As it analyzed the coverage, PEJ examined stories from a number of perspectives. What was the frame or focus (for example, should the U.S. get involved militarily)? What was the message? Who were the sources? What was the headline? What was the format — edit packages vs. interviews? Was it reporting or opinion?

There were some small differences between Al-Jazeera America's coverage and that

of its U.S. competitors. For example, while they represented a small amount of its overall reporting, the upstart channel framed more of its stories around the humanitarian crisis stemming from the Syrian civil war. And it aired more stories from Middle Eastern countries, not including Syria itself, than the others.

But on important aspects of the situation, Al-Jazeera America differed little from its competitors.

* The largest amount of coverage of the crisis on Al-Jazeera America was devoted to the question of whether the U.S. should get involved. The

American policymakers and politicians.

* Al-Jazeera America is the successor to Current TV, the little-watched, liberal-leaning cable network that Qatar purchased from Al Gore in January for about \$500 million. It's available in about 43 million households, far fewer than its competitors can reach. Al-Jazeera America's initial ratings were low; it will take awhile for it to raise its profile and see if it can compete.

* The sources most often cited on Al-Jazeera America and the three U.S. cable channels were

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Religion in Society

Congolese nun teaches refugees: wins award

(RNS) Angélique Namaika, a Roman Catholic nun, rides a bicycle on the rutted roads of the Democratic Republic of Congo's northeastern province of Orientale, which is plagued by rebel violence.

On these same roads, the Lord's Resistance Army, a Christian rebel group led by Joseph Kony, a self-proclaimed prophet of God, has been killing, abducting and mutilating women and children.

But none of that has deterred Sister Namaika from helping displaced women learn trades, start small businesses and go to school.

For her fearlessness and dedication, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees last week awarded her the 2013 Nansen Refugee Award.

The award, established in 1954, recognizes extraordinary humanitarian work on behalf of refugees, internally displaced or stateless people. It comes with a commemorative medal and \$100,000, which she will receive Sept. 30 in Geneva. She meets with Pope Francis in Rome two days later.

Through her organization, the Centre for Reintegration and Development, Namaika has changed the lives of more than 2,000 women and girls forced from their homes and abused by the LRA. Many of those she helps recount stories of abduction, forced labor, beatings, murder, rape and other human rights abuses.

Namaika teaches them cooking, baking and sewing. The women grow vegetables

on a communally-owned field.

"When they work together on the fields, they are able to stay together," she said.

She also instructs women and children in the less tangible but equally as important skills of negotiation and marketing.

"I teach them how to communicate in the local language so that they can be able to sell their products in the markets," she said. "If their cooking is good, they can find jobs in local restaurants. If they can bake every day they can have a consistent income."

Namaika was herself displaced by the violence in 2009. She had been living in Dungu in the province of Orientale but was forced to flee to the camps by the LRA's persistent attacks.

The LRA got its start in northern Uganda, but it has been pushed out and now straddles a remote and densely forested border region of Congo, the Central African Republic and South Sudan.

Some of its captives escaped to find refuge in the villages or in towns like Dungu. Many of the traumatized survivors, who need support and skills to start a new life, have turned to the 46-year-old nun who came to the region in 2003 from the capital, Kinshasa.

The announcement of the 2013 Nansen prize coincided with the release of a report about life for those displaced by LRA violence.

According to the report, since 2008, more than 320,000 people have been forced to flee the province of Orientale

— in some cases several times. The report says LRA violence has created severe and long-lasting trauma for both the abductees and those who fled, many who are still too afraid to return home.

Namaika said she is looking forward to meeting Pope Francis.

"I will ask him to help bring peace in my country," she said. "I want him to talk to leaders here so that they commit to peace. I am going to ask him to pray for Kony, so that he confesses his sins, gives up the violence and goes back to his community."

With the prize money, Namaika hopes to develop a semi-industrial bakery for the women, which will supply its goods in Dungu and the surrounding areas. She also hopes to acquire more land so each woman can farm her own plot.



This year's Nansen Award winner Sister Angélique Namaika (standing, in black) assists women with the clothes they are making at the Maison de La Femme in the town of Dungu, Orientale Province, Democratic Republic of Congo on 1 August, 2013. Sewing is one of several income-generating skills that Sister Angélique teaches to women in order to help them to become more financially self-sufficient. Photo by Brian Sokol, courtesy of UNHCR

Five Things we learned about the Pope

Continued from front page

Francis wants to consult with the bishops, but it doesn't stop there: He wants the bishops to consult with their people, to "support the movements of God among their people with patience." The point is that the institutional church needs to account for the beliefs of the "people of God."

He expressed that most provocatively in highlighting that all Catholics — rather than the pope alone — "are infallible in matters of belief."

Francis' appreciation of consultation comes from reflecting on his past mistakes, when he vaulted to a senior leadership position in the Jesuits at the age of 36 and alienated many with his "authoritarian way of making decisions." The church, too, has been guilty of that fault, he says, and he wants to change that.

"Pope Francis is comfortable with gray"

Religion, and especially Catholicism, is widely associated with certitude and doctrinal pronouncements that draw rigid lines designed to show who's in and who's out, who's right

and who's wrong.

This pope has a different view.

"Pope Francis is comfortable with gray," writes the Rev. James Martin, a Jesuit at America magazine, which published the papal exclusive. Francis says those frightened "disciplinarians" who desire "an exaggerated doctrinal security" are missing the Christian message.

Indeed, Francis says: "If a person says that he met God with total certainty and is not touched by a margin of uncertainty, then this is not good. ... If one has the answers to all the questions — that is the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself."

The point is to have a church that is a big, messy, welcoming family, "not a small chapel that can hold only a small group of selected people. We must not reduce the bosom of the universal church to a nest protecting our mediocrity."

All of these points add up to the biggest takeaway, namely ...

Change is good

"There are ecclesiastical rules

From burlap sack to digital makeover; historic records saved

Rev. Samuel Phillips chronicled life in 1600s America in his diary that was recently rediscovered

BY G. JEFFREY MACDONALD
BOSTON (RNS) Six years ago, the people of First Congregational Church of Rowley in Massachusetts were convinced they'd lost their treasure. A 17th-century minister's 664-page diary, and its rare detailed account of community life in early America, had been missing for nearly two decades.

Then the phone rang.

A local bank was cleaning out its vaults when a staffer opened a burlap sack marked "dimes" and found an old leather-bound book with strange handwriting inside.

Sure enough, it was the long-lost diary of the late Rev. Samuel Phillips, whose keen observations of conflicts and concerns in the 1600s have now been digitized to ensure they're not lost again.

Rowley's brush with disaster points to an all-too-common problem, historians say. Irreplaceable documents from colonial Massachusetts, where churches kept better records than in other colonies, aren't protected online or in climate-controlled stacks.

Original copies are routinely squirreled away in Congregational church storage rooms or attics of parishioners' homes, where fire, flood or other mishaps could steal history forever.

"These are national treasures that speak to the founding generations of America," said James "Jeff" Cooper, an Oklahoma State University historian and director of the 2-year-old New England's Hidden Histories project. "The people of Massachusetts themselves don't understand how important and how rare these records are."

Preservationists are working to digitize and otherwise safeguard historical riches that

rest with Massachusetts Congregationalists, whose churches were the center of community life in colonial days. But the work is progressing slowly, at a rate of about one church per month, as the cash-strapped project tries to win trust from wary church members who've guarded the collections for generations. (The Colonial Society of Massachusetts has provided a \$14,000 grant for transcribing the Phillips diary.)

"They're just suspicious Yankees," said Margaret Bendroth, executive director of Boston's Congregational Library, which oversees the project. "You could not just knock on the door of the church and say, 'I'd love to digitize your records.'"

Launched in 2011, New England's Hidden Histories project has created electronic copies from 22 churches, most of which have also given originals to Boston's Congregational Library for safekeeping. The goal is to digitize the best records from 200 to 300 Massachusetts churches before turning to other states.

The effort, in partnership with Yale University's Jonathan Edwards Center and benefactors who have provided small grants, has already brought rich troves to light.

For example, First Congregational Church of Middleboro has produced more than 300 "relations," or prospective church members' personal narratives of saving grace. It's the largest known collection of New England Puritan relations, according to Cooper.

The cache is precious in part because churches generally kept ministers' notes on testimonies, but seldom saved individuals' accounts in their own words. Together with Middleboro's set

of penned confessions of sin, the relations offer a rare window into American Puritanism as lay people experienced it.

"We have this picture of the Puritans where we know what the ministers thought, because we have their sermons," Bendroth said. "These records are unique because they tell about ordinary people having disputes ... and having a voice in their own government."

Beyond the ins and outs of church life, the records hold keys to understanding how the first experiment with government by consent of the governed played out. Readers hear ordinary people claiming particular rights for the first time and laying foundations for the country's democratic experiment.

The centuries-old originals are sent away to a specialist shop in Rhode Island, where the digitization process can take months.

Reassuring churchgoers to part with records, temporarily or permanently, requires personal relationships and face-to-face meetings, Cooper said. Those can be difficult since he's in Oklahoma most of the year.

He's proposed a three-year, \$1 million budget to establish local staffing and accelerate the project, which could require millions more to complete. Finding funding for this work can be challenging, he notes, because some foundations are reluctant to sponsor church-related research, even when the goal is a nonreligious one.

Despite hurdles, the project is making progress as local church gatekeepers are persuaded to loosen their grips. When Cooper visited Old North Church in Marblehead



A 17th-century minister's 664-page diary, and its rare detailed account of community life in early America. This page records Natick (with names of Native American members). Photo courtesy Congregational Library

Pope Francis: A 'good Christian' prays for bad politicians

BY ERIC J. LYMAN
ROME (RNS) Wading into ongoing debates over religion and politics, Pope Francis on Sunday (Sept. 15) gently chided Christians to pray for politicians, saying "a Christian who does not pray for his leaders is not a good Christian."

The pope's remarks during a two-hour closed-door meeting of Roman clergy did not touch on more controversial issues like the separation between church and state, abortion, or refusing Communion to Catholic politicians who are not in sync with church teachings.

Instead, Francis quoted St. Paul, who urged prayer "for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life."

Francis said Christians should not refrain from praying for leaders they do not agree with: "Pray for him, pray for her, that they can govern well," the pontiff said, adding: "A Christian who does not pray for his leaders is not a good Christian."

The pope's remarks were notable for the divisive issues that he did not mention. His predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, tended to take a more activist role when it came to political priorities and hot-button culture wars.

The pope's relative silence on cultural issues has upset some conservatives in the U.S. church, including Bishop

in 2012, a team of five from the church met him, spread their documents on a table and invited him to look, but not take.

"It was an awesome sight," said Cooper. "But they made clear that those records would never leave the church (permanently). Possibly they would let them out for digitization. That's how difficult and how delicate this is."

After hearing Cooper explain for an hour what Old North's records mean for American history, church leaders agreed to have them digitized and stored at the Congregational Library in Boston.

Scholars hope the most detailed of Congregational Church records from every New England state will eventually be digitized, transcribed and made searchable online. Some local churchgoers are trying to rally peers in area congregations to participate.

"What we're afraid of is (records) are either going to disappear or get ruined," said David Irving, a First Congregational Church of Rowley member who's been urging other churches to safeguard and digitize their records.

A cache of records found at Natick, where Congregation-

alists established an Indian church, might show how Christianity spread to Native Americans on the early frontier. The diary of Phillips, whose 45-year tenure in Rowley spanned the Salem Witch Trials era, could shed unique light on how witch hysteria swept the region in anxious times.

"This is going to be a major boon for early New England studies," said Cooper, "because we're going to be throwing tens of thousands of pages of first primary sources — and the best primary sources — out into the digital world for scholars to look at."

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Pakistan's blasphemy laws to require death sentence for false accusers

BY RICHARD S. ERLICH
(RNS) Pakistan's constitutionally mandated Council of Islamic Ideology told the government anyone who wrongly accuses a person of blasphemy against Islam must be executed — a measure intended to protect innocent people who are often killed by mobs.

The CII demanded the measure after endorsing Pakistan's blasphemy laws, which allow a death sentence for people found guilty of desecrating the Quran, the Prophet Muhammad, mosques or Islamic beliefs.

Charges of blasphemy are sometimes leveled to settle scores or acquire property, a Pakistan Today editorial said on Friday (Sept. 20).

"Once a person is arrested it takes years, sometimes eight to 10 years, to prove his or her innocence in courts. Even if honorably acquitted, the innocent victim is not safe" and sometimes "killed inside the jail or after they were released," the editorial said.

The CII's demand to amend the laws is being presented as a way to stop people from accusing others of blasphemy without evidence.

Former Punjab Governor Salman Taseer and former Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti were assassinated in 2011 for demanding the blasphemy laws be reformed to remove the option of execution and retain only the existing punishments of imprisonment

and fines.

The CII announced the demand on Sept. 18 in Islamabad, Pakistan's capital, after the council decided that falsely accusing someone of blasphemy "is totally un-Islamic in nature and is also tantamount to blasphemy," the Pakistan Tribune reported.

CII member Allama Tahir Mehmood Ashrafi said the amendment would ensure "nobody dares to use religion to settle personal scores" and "will also silence critics of the blasphemy laws," Pakistan's Nation newspaper reported.

"I dedicate this effort to all those, including Salman Taseer and Shahbaz Bhatti, who have fought for righteousness," Ashrafi said after the CII announced its decision, according to the Union of Catholic Asian News.

The CII is a constitutional body that advises the legislature on whether a certain law is repugnant to Islam.

It is also tasked with ensuring compliance of state laws with principles of Islam.

Pakistan is an overwhelmingly Islamic society, and it is politically impossible to scrap the blasphemy laws or lessen its allowance of capital punishment.

The CII's recommendation was "a positive step forward," said Bhatti's elder brother, Paul Bhatti, chairman of the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance, which represents smaller religious groups and marginalized communities.

"We have been engaged in a long struggle towards this very end — to stop misuse of the blasphemy law. Hence, it is definitely a good development," Bhatti said.

APMA demanded capital punishment for false accusers in February to stop people abusing the blasphemy laws, Bhatti said.

More than 30 people accused of blasphemy have been killed by mobs during the past few decades, though no one has been executed after being found guilty in court, according to the British Broadcasting Corporation.

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The wonderful world of exotic cage birds

Hobbyists young and old enjoy keeping, raising and showing exotic birds

BY PAUL COLLINS JR.

Little known is the fact that many, many people are involved in the hobby of keeping and enjoying exotic birds from faraway countries.

Most people are aware of the occasional parrots they see on television commercials or in a pet shop. The hobbies about birds goes much deeper than that, and the world of keeping birds gets very colorful. Bird enthusiasts range from young to old and cover many walks of life.

The bird culture includes a unique group of people who communicate in many different ways to stay up to date on events, ideas, and other news about their hobby. The Internet has proven to be a great way for locating the right bird or birds to add to one's collection. They also use it to communicate about specific problems with breeding or diet.

The knowledge and skill needed to keep these exotic birds can range from simple to extremely difficult. The hobby can be quite challenging.

The common American Parakeet is a good starter bird and relatively easy to maintain.

On the other hand, some exotics require very special diets, special housing, and special (specific) room temperatures. Many fanciers (bird keepers) have only one cage in their home, but the birds bring them great joy with their songs. Others have complete "bird rooms" set up with the lighting on timers, and temperature and humidity controls. They go to great lengths to provide the birds with the proper diet for each season of the year. Most of these folks are breeders or serious collectors and the sky is the limit on how much they invest in their birds and their sup-

plies.

Everyone is familiar with seeing birds for sale in pet shops, and most people probably started their hobby by purchasing a bird from one of these retail establishments.

The serious fanciers and collectors attend bird fairs. These events are held all over the country throughout the year. The bird fairs can be small -- with only a few dozen exhibitors, or can be very large with over a hundred vendors. A variety of these exhibitors and vendors will set up booths at the fairs and offer cages, feed, seed, medications for the birds, and, of course, the breeders will be offering their stock to be viewed or purchased.

The tables (booth spaces) are rented. Some of the displays are very elaborate. Of course, everyone has business cards to be passed out and circulated.

The one-time small inter-



Paul Collins Jr. on right and Joe Bedwell on the left at the Tulsa, Oklahoma Bird Fair. Joe Bedwell is a well known Gouldian finch breeder from Tulsa and a retired high school science teacher. Joe's other hobby is raising orchids and he is also well known for that. Joe is responsible for breeding a very special orchid and it bears his name. He has supplied orchids to lots of famous people over the years including the actor Raymond Burr. Raymond flew into Tulsa and came to Joe's home in a limo just to purchase one very special orchid to take back to his private island. The bird fair in Tulsa is a very large event and brings people in from all across the country.

est in exotic birds has now become a very large, time consuming hobby for the serious fancier. The breeders continually focus on better and better birds with brighter and sharper colors than the year before.

As time goes on, the breeders get to know one another because of attending fairs together. Phone numbers are exchanged, and soon the customers are referred in the right direction to find that one very special bird they want or need.

The serious fancier or breeder cannot be faint at heart when it comes to work! There is plenty of work that must be done on a regular daily basis!

The bird rooms must be cared for at least twice each day. If you are a vendor at fairs, your trailer must be packed up, re-stocked, and prepared. You may be faced with driving hundreds of miles to set up for the next fair the very next weekend.

The Bird Fairs generally have a small admission

charge of \$5.00 or less, and they offer a wonderful experience for individuals or families. At a fair featuring the wonderful world of exotic cage birds you will meet some exceptionally interesting people. And, who knows, you may be a candidate to become engaged in this life-transforming and emotionally gratifying hobby.

(Paul Collins, Jr. is the son of Dr. Paul Collins, and an avid bird enthusiast. His interests range from exotic cage birds to Racing Pigeons.)

Hobby Lobby's Steve Green unveils 'oldest Jewish prayer book ever found'

BY LARTEN MARKOE

AUSTIN, Texas (RNS) Evangelical businessman Steve Green on Thursday (Oct. 26) unveiled what he called "the oldest Jewish prayer book ever found" and will add it to the collection of religious artifacts that will form the core of the Bible museum he is building in Washington, D.C.

The artifact, dating from 840 A.D., is written in Hebrew on parchment and shows Babylonian vowel marks. Green said it was purchased less than a year ago from a private collection and is of Middle Eastern origin. But he declined to name the seller or how much he paid for it.

About the size of a large smartphone, and 50 pages long, the seller likely knew the book was special but did not realize its significance, said Jerry Pattengale, executive director of the Green Scholars Initiative, the research arm of The Green Collection.

The prayer book — a rare complete codex in its original tan-colored binding — includes a listing of the 100 Benedictions, or blessings that some observant Jews say daily.

It may well be the "earliest



Likely the oldest Jewish prayer book ever found, dated by both scholars and Carbon-14 tests to circa 840 C.E. Photo courtesy Green Scholars Initiative

connection today's practicing Jews have to the roots of their modern-day rabbinic liturgy," Green said.

Green, whose billionaire family owns the Oklahoma-based Hobby Lobby chain of more than 550 craft stores — made the announcement at the annual meeting of the Religion Newswriters Association.

Green has made headlines recently for his lawsuit against a federal mandate that would require most employers to provide free birth control and the so-called morning-after pill in their health insurance plans. The case appears headed to the Supreme Court.

In 2009, he founded The Green Collection, which now includes more than 40,000 ancient artifacts. They will be housed in a Bible museum planned for a site just south of the U.S. Capitol, slated to open in 2017.

Green reiterated his belief that the Bible is a foundation of the nation's success — 94 percent of U.S. households have at least one Bible, he said, despite a tremendous "brain drain" of biblical knowledge.

"Our desire is to have a non-sectarian museum that tells this book's story and let you decide what you do with it," he said of his yet-to-be-named museum.

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