

Newsbytes

The First Watch

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“Let us be alert to the season in which we are living. It is the season of the Blessed Hope, calling for us to cut our ties with the world and build ourselves on this One who will soon appear. He is our hope—a Blessed Hope enabling us to rise above our times and fix our gaze upon Him.” Tozer

Every so often I come across a quotable that I think says something important and says it well. This week's quotable is from a gentleman named Glenn Christopherson.

Quotable:

“The high and holy task before us as twice born children of God, is not to make the Most High popular, but to make Him known.

As the redeemed of the Lord we are not His PR department but His ambassadors, not delivering politically motivated, poll driven pronouncements; but rather we herald the King... and His commands...and His pardon available to otherwise doomed rebels. We don't pander to men's egos with the falseness of flattery, manipulating the message to make our God "attractive" to godless men, or even less to make ourselves popular with the King' enemies. In fact the gospel is not, as some propose, a message that makes God acceptable to men, but rather the Divine ultimatum that, when received, makes men acceptable to God. In obedience we call on men to lay down their arms of treason against God, and lift up their arms in surrender and worship to the Holy One of Israel.

Our job is not to try to draw the crowds with our carnally pragmatic bells and whistles, nor is it to preach out of ever changing surveys, but to clearly and boldly speak out of the inerrant, eternal, infallible, unshakeable and immutable word.”

Global debt hits all-time high of \$152 trillion as IMF warns of world-wide economic stagnation

A debt storm is building over the world economy, the IMF warned, as a vicious cycle of slow growth and more debt could take hold

5 OCTOBER 2016 • 2:45PM

Global debt has hit a record high of \$152 trillion, weighing down economic growth and adding to risks that recovery could turn into stagnation or even recession, the International Monetary Fund has warned.

In a worst-case scenario the IMF also fears that a wave of populist politics across the US and Europe could send globalisation into reverse with protectionist policies hitting international trade, investment and migration,

sending the world plunging into a prolonged period of stagnation.

The warning came after the IMF cut its growth forecasts for a series of countries around the world, leaving Britain the fastest growing economy in the G7.

It is urging governments to help troubled banks in the worst-affected parts of Europe, spend more money on boosting economic growth where possible, and reform economies to increase GDP – as well as pushing to keep borders as open as possible.

“At 225pc of world GDP, the global debt ...is currently at an all-time high. Two-thirds, amounting to about \$100 trillion, consists of liabilities of the private sector which can carry great risks when they reach excessive levels,” the IMF said in its fiscal monitor.

“The sheer size of debt could set the stage for an unprecedented private deleveraging process that could thwart the fragile economic recovery.”

This debt burden is mounting at a time when slow growth means inflation and interest rates will remain low, making it hard for companies, individuals and governments to earn their way out of debt.

A combination of low growth, high debt and weak banks could push the world in a dangerous financial and political direction, the IMF said.

“The political climate is unsettled in many countries. A lack of income growth and a rise in inequality have opened the door for populist, inward-looking policies,” the IMF warned in its global financial stability report.

“These developments make it even harder to tackle legacy problems, further expose economies and markets to shocks, and raise the risk of a gradual slide into economic and financial stagnation. In such a state, financial institutions struggle to sustain healthy balance sheets, which weakens economic growth and financial stability.”

The IMF does not name politicians directly, but the campaigns of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton have seen a marked turn against globalisation in the US, while EU leaders have struggled to agree a trade deal with either the US or Canada.

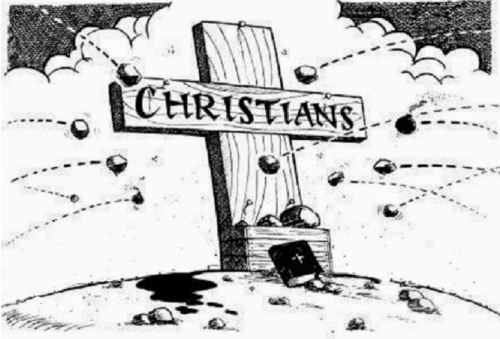
In a hypothetical scenario imagining a wave of protectionism, the IMF said “These initiatives limit or reverse international trade and financial integration, generating a sell-off in stock markets on profitability concerns and reduced risk appetite, with the real equity price falling by 20pc in the eurozone, the UK and the US over two years,” illustrating the scale of the danger.

Banks would be crushed by the economic slump while private consumption and business investment would also fall, hitting growth further.

“Protectionist measures in Europe and the US [would] ultimately generate secular stagnation, given constrained macroeconomic policy responses,” the IMF said.

Meanwhile it called for action to help troubled banks deal with their problems, reducing bad debts in the short-term, and kick-starting the supply of credit to boost longer-term growth.

Gov. Jerry Brown signs SB 1146 initiating State control over religion



OCTOBER 1, 2016 | Sacramento, California -- Among the final round of bills signed September 30 by California Governor Jerry Brown is SB 1146, which initiates State control over religion by placing the State in a new role of judging religious matters on religious property.

SaveCalifornia.com, a veteran pro-child, pro-family organization that promotes moral virtues for the common good, is calling for a First Amendment lawsuit against SB 1146 to protect the free exercise of religion of faith-based college, universities, seminaries, and bible schools.

"SB 1146 is a blatant violation of 'separation of church and state,'" said Randy Thomasson, president of SaveCalifornia.com, which fought against SB 1146 to the end, using paid ads reaching hundreds of thousands of concerned Californians. "For the first time in California, religious matters on religious property will be judged by the government. If you don't want a State government religion, this is a frightening new development. When government regulates religion, government has become the new 'god.'"

"Despite an outpouring of opposition from concerned citizens who know that free exercise of religion is in the U.S. and California constitutions, Jerry Brown ignored the supreme laws he's repeatedly sworn to uphold," Thomasson said. "For current religious freedom to be protected, there must be a First Amendment lawsuit to strike down SB 1146 and restore respect for our precious constitutional rights."

"It's wrong for the State of California to steal away territory from sacred ground, effectively making the State the new 'moral' authority over religion," Thomasson said. "This is why a half-dozen religious colleges urged a veto of SB 1146 in the final days before Brown took action. They believe in the U.S. and California constitutions and religious diversity, even if Jerry Brown and the Democrats who passed SB 1146 don't."

See SaveCalifornia.com's analysis of SB 1146, as signed by Governor Brown:

SB 1146, as amended August 19, still harms religious freedom.

The August 19 amendments to SB 1146 still contain most of the problematic sections of the bill, which continue to harm religious freedom by giving the State unprecedented, unconstitutional, and subjective control over religious matters.

As such, SB 1146 violates "separation of church and state" and the religious freedom guarantees of both the U.S. and California constitutions.

A new 8/19/16 amendment made the bill worse. Even though current state law says a religious organization is in control of its postsecondary educational institution, SB 1146 now puts the State in control -- by requiring a religious college that is exempt under Education Code § 66271 to justify "its basis for having the exemption."

Inserted is Section 2(a)(2), reading: "Beginning with the 2017-18 school year, each postsecondary educational institution in this state not described in subdivision (a) that has an exemption pursuant to Section 66271 shall submit to the Student Aid Commission its basis for having the exemption."

Yet Education Code § 66271 reads: "This chapter shall not apply to an educational institution that is controlled by a religious organization if the application would not be consistent with the religious tenets of that organization."

Why must a church now justify its own religious doctrines to the State? Is the religious organization in control of its educational institution, as Section 66271 recognizes - or is the State in control of it?

Why is the State even examining the "religious tenets" of religious colleges?

The previous problems in SB 1146 remain and were not removed by the latest amendments.

The amended SB 1146 continues to state:

Section 1(a): Exempt religious colleges "shall disclose ... the scope of the allowable activities provided by the exemption."

What if all "allowable activities" aren't listed and disclosed?

Or, what if all non-"allowable activities" aren't listed and disclosed?

How would the State objectively judge whether "the scope of allowable activities" listed by religious colleges means some - or means all - of these religious colleges' "allowable" or non-"allowable" activities?

What if a religious college disciplined a student for violating a religious standard that was not mentioned in the scope-of-activities-list provided to the State?

SB 1146's mandate upon religious colleges -- "shall disclose ... the scope of allowable activities provided by the exemption" -- creates a dangerous new government power to subjectively inspect, judge, and enforce compliance of religious colleges as to what is "allowable" or not "allowable" on campus.

The amended SB 1146 continues to state:

Section 1(b)(1-4): "The disclosure required ... shall be made in all of the following ways ... a prominent location of the campus or school site ... in written materials sent to prospective students ... as part of orientation programs ... provided to each faculty member ... administrative staff ... support staff ... each new employee..."

What if the disclosure isn't satisfactorily posted, presented, or delivered in the eyes of the State?

What if the disclosure isn't viewed by the State as being complete or accurate?

What mechanism is there to verify receipt, so as to avoid future non-receipt claims?

The amended bill's requirement that exempt religious colleges "shall" post and distribute their religious standards will be enforced by the State's subjective interpretations, due to the bill's vagueness. This sets up religious colleges for inspections, complaints, and even lawsuits claiming the information was never provided (the bill has no receipt mechanism).

The amended SB 1146 continues to state:

Section 1(b)(5): "The disclosure shall be included in any publication of the institution that sets forth the comprehensive rules, regulations, procedures, and standards of conduct for the institution."

What if the "the scope of allowable activities" in the disclosure is unsatisfactory in substance, format, or completeness in the eyes of the State?

Will there be inspections, search warrants, or lawsuits to compel "proper" publishing?

The bill's mandate that these religious colleges publish their moral codes in "any publication" on the topic invites State inspections, search warrants, or lawsuits. Will the State compel "proper" publishing if the Student Aid Commission or California Attorney General isn't satisfied with a religious college's "compliance"?

The amended SB 1146 continues to state:

Section 2(a): Exempt religious colleges "shall submit to the Student Aid Commission copies of all materials submitted to, and received from, a state or federal agency concerning the granting of the exemption."

Why is the State requiring more than the U.S. government's letter granting a religious exemption to Title IX? For example, the State routinely recognizes IRS letters granting tax-exemption to nonprofit organizations. Why the requirement to also submit "all" of the application materials submitted by a religious college that already has a Title IX exemption?

What if the State suspects not "all" materials have been provided to it by religious colleges claiming a federal or state exemption? What kind of inspections, search warrants, or lawsuits could occur?

The bill's mandate that exempt religious colleges provide to the State "all" their application papers for an already-established exemption makes the State a judge of the quality and validity of religious exemptions. It puts the State into the role of an investigator and enforcer on religious matters.

The amended SB 1146 continues to state:

Section 2(b): "The Student Aid Commission shall collect the information received pursuant to subdivision (a) and post and maintain a list on the commission's Internet Web site of the institutions that have claimed the exemption with their respective bases for claiming or having the exemption."

Why should the State be elevated to a position of judging the moral policies of religious colleges, which, under SB 1146, must try to justify "their respective bases for claiming or having the exemption"?

On the state website, will exempt colleges be labeled negatively or disparaged?

By requiring religious institutions to justify their exemption, the State makes itself a judge of the religious doctrines/ beliefs/practices of religious colleges, which, under SB 1146, must attempt to justify to the State "their respective bases for claiming the exemption." This subjective mandate creates an official State prejudice against exempt colleges, and in regard to Title IX exemptions, has the State acting as if state law were supreme to federal law. As written, SB 1146 clearly violates "separation of church and state."

Survey Finds Most American Christians Are Actually Heretics

Americans talking about theology sound about as competent as country singers rapping.

G. Shane Morris By G. Shane Morris

OCTOBER 10, 2016

Evangelical writer Eric Metaxas remarked on BreakPoint last week that if Americans took a theology exam, their only hope of passing would be if God graded on a curve. He's right. In knowing both the content of the Bible and the doctrinal foundations of Christianity, we Americans aren't just at the bottom of our class. We are, as Ross Douthat argues in his book, "Bad Religion," a nation of heretics.

A survey of 3,000 people conducted by LifeWay Research and commissioned by Ligonier Ministries found that although Americans still overwhelmingly identify as "Christian," startling percentages of the nation embrace ancient errors condemned by all major Christian traditions. These are not minor points of doctrine, but core ideas that define Christianity itself. The really sad part? Even when we're denying the divinity of Christ, we can't keep our story straight. Americans talking about theology sound about as competent as country singers rapping.

We're an Embarrassment to Heretics Everywhere

Seven out of ten respondents in LifeWay's survey affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity—that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three Persons but one God, and six in ten agreed that Jesus is both human and divine. Their orthodoxy—and consistency—ended there. More than half went on to indicate that Jesus is "the first and greatest being created by God," a heresy known as Arianism, which the Council of Nicaea condemned in 325 A.D.

Of course, most of these accidental blasphemers aren't preparing to revise the resulting Nicene Creed and preach a creaturely Christ. Rather, bizarre contradictions like this illustrate how many Americans don't understand or even care what the Trinity means (although they say they believe in it, likely out of habits learned growing up in church).

The responses to other questions were no less heterodox or headache-inducing. Seventy percent of participants—who ranged across socioeconomic and racial backgrounds—agreed there's only one true God. Yet sixty-four percent also thought this God accepts the worship of all religions, including those that believe in many gods.

Two-thirds admitted that everyone sins a little bit, but still insisted that most people are good by nature, which directly contradicts scripture (See "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," and "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?"). Over half said it's fair for God to exercise his wrath against sin, but seemed to waffle about which sins deserved wrath (not theirs!). Seventy-four percent said the "smallest sins" don't warrant eternal damnation, in contrast to Jesus' brother, who when writing at the Holy Spirit's inspiration taught that even one infraction of God's law is enough to sink someone. But really, what did he know?

A full 60 percent agreed that "everyone eventually goes to heaven," but half of those surveyed also checked the box saying that "only those who believe in Jesus will be saved." So either these folks are saying everyone will eventually believe in Jesus, or they hired a monkey to take the survey for them.

Evangelicals Didn't Even Study for This Test

It's one thing for Americans in general to lack basic theological knowledge. After all, many of the 75 percent of the country who call themselves Christians don't take their faith that seriously, and the rest are either members of other religions, or have no religion. But what about those who wear their Christianity on their sleeve? Surely such a group—evangelicals, for instance—would perform much better.

That's what the folks at LifeWay thought, too. In a similar project conducted two years ago, researchers asked participants to self-identify, resulting in an inflated number of professing "evangelicals. Not surprisingly, this group Christmas-treed the survey, espousing all kinds of unorthodox views.

So this year, LifeWay used more stringent criteria for evangelical faith, as defined by some group called the National Association of Evangelicals. Only participants who called the Bible their highest authority, said personal evangelism is important, and indicated that trusting in Jesus' death on the cross is the only way of salvation, were labeled "evangelical." They totaled 586 survey-takers.

Everyone expected them to perform better than most Americans. No one expected them to perform worse. Seven in ten evangelicals—more than the population at large—said that Jesus was the first being God created. Fifty-six percent agreed that "the Holy Spirit is a divine force but not a personal being." They also saw a huge increase in evangelicals (28 percent, up from 9 percent) who indicated that the Third Person of the Trinity is not equal with God the Father or Jesus, a direct contradiction of orthodox Christianity. The Holy Spirit is, of course, used to being overlooked. But sources say he seemed bummed about these results.

As before, it's really the contradictory answers, not the outright heresies, that should most concern us. By definition, the evangelicals in this survey believed that "only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God's free gift of eternal salvation." Yet nearly half agreed that "God accepts the worship of all religions including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam."

Two-thirds of evangelicals—more than Americans in general—said heaven is a place where all people will ultimately be reunited with their loved ones. That such a high percentage of Billy Graham's camp is now talking like Rob Bell isn't even the real story. The most striking thing is how many of these folks evidently see no contradiction between their casual universalism and the evangelical creed that salvation comes through faith in Christ alone.

“There is a lot in this survey which shows that the respondents are not even being internally consistent,” Timothy Larson, a professor of Christian thought at Wheaton College, told Christianity Today. He suspects the wording of the survey, itself, may have thrown off the participants.

But could it also have something to do with the fact that two out of five evangelicals say “worshipping alone or with family is a valid replacement for regularly attending church”? Come to think of it, should we marvel that so many Christians shrug off church when so few congregations teach the foundational doctrines of the faith, or even delve very deeply into the book from which those doctrines come?

The Bible Ain’t a Lucky Rabbit’s Foot

Former Newsday religion reporter Kenneth Briggs recently told Religion News Service that the faith he finds in “mega-type churches” is a “Bible-less,” “alternative version of Christianity.” Scripture, he says, has become “a museum exhibit, hallowed as a treasure but enigmatic and untouched.”

In his book, “The Invisible Bestseller: Searching for the Bible in America,” he describes a two-year pilgrimage across the country, visiting hundreds of churches to find Christians who were still literate in their own sacred text.

The Bible remains phenomenally popular, of course. Practically everyone has one in his or her home, and many families own four or five. But Briggs characterizes our love for the Bible as love for an “artifact,” a “keepsake,” or a lucky “rabbit’s foot.” This talisman of faith mainly stays on the shelf or mantle next to the urn filled with grandpa’s ashes.

Briggs says it was in a prison, not a church, where he encountered the most vibrant and intimate familiarity with God’s Word. Most everywhere else, his observations confirmed a recent Barna survey conducted for the American Bible Society, which found that less than half the country can name the first five books of the Old Testament, and that a similar number think John the Baptist was one of Jesus’s twelve disciples.

Why does it matter that we’ve become a nation of doctrinal dunces? What harm is there in flunking Christianity 101? Well, for Christians, the answer is obvious. If we really believe what we profess—that the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the single most important fact of history and eternity—then we’d better improve our grade. Knowing who the God we claim to worship is can no longer be a third priority if we want the world to take us seriously as his followers.

Recall also that Jesus told us knowing the truth sets us free. Believing lies enslaves people. It should be a priority for us to continually seek truth, rather than comfort. Christ also told us the greatest commandment includes loving God with our minds. That means dusting off grandpa’s Bible, and revisiting a catechism or confession.

For those who don’t profess Christianity, gaining a basic understanding of the creeds and Scriptures of the religion that built our civilization isn’t a bad idea, either. As Indian Christian philosopher Vishal Mangalwadi writes, the Bible created the modern world by making the West a reading and thinking civilization, and by grounding this reading and thinking in the idea that truth is knowable.

In the subduction zone between a nominally Christian culture and a distinctly post-Christian one, sparks are flying—in florist’s shops, bakeries, universities, legislatures, and bathrooms nationwide. Those who want to live in peace with the still-sizeable Christian remnant need to move past lazy dismissals of religious “bigotry,” and learn why Christians have come to the conclusions we have for 2,000 years.

The results of this survey ought to embarrass all of us. But they should also serve as a kick in the pants to re-familiarize ourselves with our own religion—or at least our own history. There’s no excuse to be a nation of heretics. But even that is preferable to being a nation of ignoramuses.

Turkey-Russia ties thaw amid gas deal

Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) and his Turkish counterpart Tayyip Erdogan arrive for a news conference following their meeting in Istanbul, Turkey, October 10, 2016. (AFP/Xinhua)

ANKARA, Oct. 10 (Xinhua) -- Turkey and Russia has reached a significant moment in relations as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin set aside disagreements and sealed an energy agreement on Monday on the sidelines of the 23rd World Energy Congress in Istanbul.

Despite differences over Syria, the two leaders signed an intergovernmental agreement on long-delayed Turkish Stream natural gas project.

The project, initiated by Putin in 2014 as an alternative route to the canceled South Stream project that would pass through Bulgaria, intends to deliver Russian gas to Turkey and European markets through the Black Sea.

The project was suspended following Turkey's downing of a Russian warplane in November 2015, but negotiations resumed after Ankara and Moscow moved to revive their relations in late June.

The project was later brought back to the agenda, which reduced its total capacity from 63 billion cubic meters (bcm) per year to 31 bcm, with 15.75 going to Turkey and the remaining part to the East Europe, according to Necdet Pamir, an energy expert and instructor at Bilkent University.

They are drawn together because both are "stuck" against the EU and the United States, said Pamir.

Sanctions imposed by the U.S. and the EU due to Russia's annexation of Crimea, he said, are the primary concerns for Putin in his decision to normalize ties with Ankara.

"He wants to enter Turkish markets with great potentialities and consolidate the current agreements," he said.

Likewise, Erdogan needed rapprochement with Moscow because of the developments in the Middle East and Ankara's tensions with the EU and the U.S., Pamir told Xinhua.

The pipeline will pave the way for Russia to reach European markets at a time when Moscow is suffering economic sanctions from the EU over Crimea, which was incorporated into Russia from Ukraine in 2014 following a referendum, he said.

"Turkey is our neighbor and a partner that is important to us. Our trade volume surged to 35 billion U.S. dollars in 2014, but it decreased by almost 40 percent in the first eight months of 2016 compared to the same period of 2015 due to the diplomatic crisis," Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak was quoted as saying by daily Hurriyet on Monday.

Besides the Turkish Stream, Akkuyu nuclear power plant is another crucial project that plays a key part in normalizing the ties between the two countries. "In the normalization process, energy is one of the key areas. Both the Turkish Stream and the Akkuyu power plant are crucial projects that will revive our ties," Novak said.

The icy ties between Ankara and Moscow began to thaw in June when Erdogan wrote a letter to Putin to express his deep sorrow over the jet incident.

The two countries have since increasingly normalized relations with telephone calls and meetings between their leaders.