

RNA RELIGION REPORTER OF THE YEAR—LARGE NEWSPAPERS & WIRE SERVICES 2013

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1) The story behind Pope Francis' election

David Gibson | Mar 15, 2013

<http://archives.religionnews.com/faith/faith-archives/the-story-behind-pope-francis-election>

VATICAN CITY (RNS) Last Sunday night (March 10), the Rev. Thomas Rosica was walking through the Piazza Navona in Rome's historic center when he bumped into Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, who he has known for years. Bergoglio was walking alone, wearing a simple black cassock and he stopped and grabbed Rosica's hands.

"I want you to pray for me," the Argentine cardinal told Rosica, a Canadian priest who was assisting as a Vatican spokesman during the papal interregnum. Rosica asked him if he was nervous. "A little bit," Bergoglio confessed.

He had reason to be worried. Two days later, on Tuesday evening, he and 114 other cardinals entered the conclave to elect a successor to Benedict XVI; a little more than 24 hours and five ballots after that, Bergoglio emerged on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica as Pope Francis.

It was a surprising outcome, and even if Bergoglio suspected something was up, few others did, including many of the cardinals in the Sistine Chapel with him.

"I think it all came together in an extraordinary fashion," Chicago Cardinal Francis George told the Chicago Tribune.

Unexpected momentum

George said Bergoglio's name had not surfaced as an option in the week of closed-door discussions among the cardinals before the conclave, and Bergoglio had also dropped off the radar of most journalists. He was 76, and many cardinals said they would not vote for someone older than 70. Bergoglio was also reportedly the runner-up to Benedict in the conclave of 2005 and unlikely to return as a candidate.

"I wouldn't have expected it to happen either this fast or even the way it developed in terms of the choices available to us," George said. "I believe the Holy Spirit makes clear which way we should go. And we went that way very quickly."

The Holy Spirit, yes, but other forces also contributed to the unexpected result. And despite the cone of silence that is supposed to remain over all proceedings inside the

conclave, leaks in the Italian press and interviews with various cardinal-electors have begun to give a clearer picture of how this 28-hour conclave unfolded.

What happened, in short, is that during the first "shake out" ballot on Tuesday evening, Bergoglio's name drew a surprising number of votes, suddenly putting him out there as a potential candidate.

"Cardinal Bergoglio wouldn't have become pope in the fifth ballot if he had not been a really strong contender for the papacy from the beginning," Austrian Cardinal Christoph Schoenborn told reporters.

Until then, the field had been considered fairly open, with two main camps each looking for a champion: There were those who wanted a pope who would reform the Roman Curia, the papal bureaucracy -- and preferably someone from outside Europe to represent the church's demographic shift to the Southern Hemisphere. Then there were the electors who wanted to defend the Curia, and they were joined by some who also hoped to keep the papacy in Europe, or even return it to an Italian.

The "reform" camp had no clear champion but a dozen or more possibilities. They reportedly wanted someone from outside Europe, in particular a Latin American, but weren't sure who.

The Roman camp, on the other hand, had apparently begun to lean toward Brazilian Cardinal Odilo Pedro Scherer, who was born of German immigrant parents and had long experience in the Curia. That made him a plausible Southern Hemisphere candidate, but one with strong European and curial ties.

In the days leading up to the conclave, however, Cardinal Angelo Scola of Milan had increasingly emerged as an apparent front-runner because he was seen as an Italian who could fix the Vatican, a combination that some said could attract votes from both camps.

An appealing combination

Throughout this wrangling, Bergoglio had maintained a low profile, which was in keeping with his reputation for humility and holiness, and several electors said they found that refreshing. Moreover, Bergoglio had a fierce pastoral dedication to the poor, and he was born in Argentina to Italian immigrant parents. While he is 76, he is in good health but not so young that he is likely have a marathon pontificate.

All those elements made for an appealing combination.

"He is not part of the Italian system, but also at the same time, because of his culture and background, he was Italo-compatible," French Cardinal Andre Vingt-Trois told

reporters. "If there was a chance that someone could intervene with justice in this situation" -- reforming the Curia -- "he was the man who could do it best."

In the first round of voting, not only did Bergoglio make an unexpectedly strong showing, but Scola did not fare well, and neither did Scherer or another leading contender, Canadian Marc Ouellet, who works in the Curia.

That night, sequestered at the Casa Santa Marta residence that houses the cardinals during a conclave, the reform camp began to coalesce around Bergoglio. The Argentine continued to gain strength during the two ballots on Wednesday morning. At lunch, he "seemed very weighed down by what was happening," according to Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, who sat next to him.

According to La Repubblica, an Italian daily with good sources in the Vatican, Washington's Cardinal Donald Wuerl played a key role in rallying the Americans to Bergoglio, and they were followed by European bishops such as Vingt-Trois.

As Bergoglio gained steam, Scola's fortunes continued to decline, thanks also to "ancient envies and rivalries," as La Stampa's Giacomo Galeazzi put it, among the 28 Italian electors -- a bloc far larger than any other country's, but also more fractious and "inexorably hostile to Scola."

"In the last few hours there were signs that Scola's strong candidacy was a giant with clay feet," Galeazzi wrote.

No Italian restoration

By the fourth ballot on Wednesday -- the fifth since the conclave had begun -- Bergoglio passed the threshold of 77 votes on his way to upwards of 90 votes out of 115. It was just before 7 p.m., a little more than 24 hours since they started, and the Catholic Church had a new pope. "I was surprised that consensus among the cardinals was reached so soon," said Ireland's Cardinal Sean Brady.

Also surprised, apparently, was the Italian bishops' conference, which was so sure that Scola would win that it sent out a message of congratulations to Scola on his election as soon as the white smoke appeared over the Sistine Chapel.

Yet there was to be no Italian restoration.

"You don't ask why they changed their votes. Nor do you know who changed their votes. But it became fairly clear as we voted that perhaps it was going to go in some other unexpected way, but more quickly also," said George. "There are surprises. That's a sign of the Holy Spirit, I think."

2) Is 'Just War' doctrine another victim of the Syrian conflict?

David Gibson | Sep 10, 2013

<http://archives.religionnews.com/ethics/ethics-archives/analysis-is-just-war-doctrine-another-victim-of-the-syrian-conflict>

(RNS) Even as the world's powers grasped for a last-minute resolution to the crisis in Syria, it remained an open question whether any amount of diplomacy could prevent the conflict from claiming at least one more victim: the classic Christian teaching known as the "just war" tradition.

The central problem is not that the just war doctrine is being dismissed or condemned, but that it is loved too much. Indeed, both sides in the debate over punishing the Syrian regime for using chemical weapons are citing just war theory, but are reaching diametrically opposed conclusions.

Nicholas Hahn III, a Catholic writer, declared Tuesday in the conservative journal First Things that "a classical reading of the just war tradition renders robust intervention in Syria a morally desirable act of charity."

At the same time, the Catholic editor of that same magazine, R.R. Reno, has been writing forcefully against intervention and even labeled the administration's arguments for military strikes "morally sloppy."

A similar contrast could be found at the liberal National Catholic Reporter, which published an editorial blasting "the bankruptcy of the military strike idea."

That in turn drew a sharp rejoinder from one of its own columnists, Michael Sean Winters, who said NCR's position was based on "myths" that have muddled clear moral thinking on the Catholic left. "When Congress votes ... on the authorization of force, if they do not support President Obama they are, de facto, supporting (Syrian) President Assad," wrote Winters, calling Assad an "evil man."

And so it has gone for weeks now, with the divides seeming to grow wider by the day. The splits are most obvious within the Catholic Church, which over the centuries developed the most clearly articulated just war doctrine. But Protestants of varying hues are also citing just war principles and reaching starkly different conclusions.

"The friends of the just war idea are sometimes worse than its foes," said James Turner Johnson, a professor of religious ethics at Rutgers University and a leading expert on just war theory.

'Violence in a limited way'

The just war doctrine was first articulated by St. Augustine in the fifth century to provide a moral rationale that, as Duke University theologian Stanley Hauerwas put it, "enables Christians to use violence in a limited way to secure tolerable order."

Eight centuries later, the systematic theologian St. Thomas Aquinas elaborated the basic principles of the theory that continue to be invoked by both religious and secular moralists. The just war doctrine was also embraced by the Protestant reformer Martin Luther and used by the 20th-century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr as a framework for his notion of "Christian realism" — a tradition President Obama often relies on.

Today, different sources will render the just war formula in slightly different ways, but the basic conditions of the doctrine remain the same:

- * To justify military action there must be a "just cause," such as self-defense or protecting innocent life, and a "just authority" — a legitimate, sovereign entity — to wage the war.
- * The warring power must also have a "right intention" — doing the right thing for the right reason, rather than for revenge or personal gain.
- * The decision to go to war must be a last resort, and there must be a "probability of success" in achieving a clearly articulated outcome.
- * There must be a commitment to "proportionality" in conducting the war — inflicting the least amount of harm necessary to secure peace, and avoiding violence against noncombatants, or what we today call "collateral damage."

Given the number of conditions and the complexity of the Syrian civil war, it is not surprising that commentators can reach different conclusions, or will grind their teeth in frustration over the high bar of meeting all the just war conditions while arguing that doing nothing is not a good moral option.

Yet there are several other factors that are complicating the usual moral calculus, and threatening to undermine just war theory itself.

Complicating factors

One is that some leading Christian voices have increasingly moved toward a de facto pacifism that stands against war under any circumstance. "In contrast to pacifism, it is often assumed that just war reflection is 'realistic,'" Hauerwas, a leading exponent of this view, wrote this month.

"It is by no means clear, however, if advocates of just war have provided an adequate account of what kind of conditions are necessary for just war to be a realistic alternative for the military policy of a nation."

The Catholic hierarchy in recent years has also seemed to migrate in the pacifist direction, an evolution highlighted by Pope Francis' high-profile campaign against any military action in Syria. "The sweeping language of such criticism by the pontiff moves the Roman Catholic Church dramatically further in what now seems to be an accelerating arc in its opposition to warfare," Catholic University's Stephen Schneck wrote in *The Washington Post*.

The problem with that shift is twofold. First, it supplants traditional just war doctrine with the relatively new concept of "just peacemaking," which is not as clearly articulated nor as readily applicable to real-world circumstances.

Second, many anti-war Christians have also embraced the emerging principle of the "Responsibility to Protect," or R2P, which cites an imperative to intervene to protect innocents in harm's way. But even that can put moralists in a bind because it demands that something be done to thwart violence even if all the classic just war conditions are not met.

Critics say conservatives have also contributed to the confusion by overemphasizing the notion of "pre-emption" as a form of self-defense — the principle that was used to justify the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, an action that proved to have violated most every other just war condition.

In addition, some neocons and theocons who cited just war theory in supporting President George W. Bush's push to invade Iraq are now invoking just war theory to oppose President Obama's plans for more limited actions against Syria — an apparent contradiction that does just war theory no favors.

The upshot is that there is now a "chaotic just war discourse," as Johnson put it, that leaves even its champions wondering "whether the success of just war reasoning hasn't in fact been very problematic for it."

Yet Johnson also sees no real alternative. Just war is now an integral part of Western culture, and can provide the best framework for working through the thorniest moral dilemmas.

"For me the question is how you use these ideas once you pull them out and deploy them," he said. "I just think there's a tremendous amount of confusion in the current debate."

3) The “Breaking Bad” finale was great. But was it good?

David Gibson | Oct 4, 2013

<http://archives.religionnews.com/culture/culture-archives/analysis-the-breaking-bad-finale-was-great.-but-was-it-good>

WARNING: More spoilers below than the Book of Revelation.

Nearly a week after the “Breaking Bad” finale aired, the ending of the megahit cable series continues to gratify, infuriate, and above all fascinate the moralists — professional and amateur — who constitute the audience’s fanboy core and who always framed the most vigorous debates about the show.

That’s understandable: The series at its dark heart is a study of good and evil, and more specifically about how good people can do bad things, how they become bad, or whether we all have a seed of evil within us that can germinate and run amok under the right conditions.

Further proof that the series’ drama is a profoundly religious one is the fact that theologically minded people are still fiercely disputing exactly what the ending meant, and what the series — and its anti-hero, Walter White — stood for in moral and metaphysical terms.

Is the chemistry-teacher-turned-meth-cooker an irredeemable monster? Or maybe he is just one of us — a struggling, middle-class worker bee who gets a diagnosis of lung cancer and, hearing how profitable the drug trade can be, uses his talents to concoct premium-grade drugs to make a quick score that will support his wife and children long after he’s dead.

Certainly the ending was inevitable and unsurprising: White dies, as he had to. The show’s creator, Vince Gilligan, made it clear — yes, some held out hope over the course of five seasons — that “this story was finite all along. It’s a story that starts at A and ends at Z.”

But how Walt died, who he would take down with him — or spare — and whether he ended in a state of grace were burning questions for devotees of the series, as they are for all believers.

Eschatology, the study of our ultimate fate, is what all religious exploring points to. So do TV dramas.

“I want to believe there is some sort of cosmic balancing of the scales at the end of it all,” Gilligan said last year. “I’d just like to believe there’s some point to it all. I’d like to believe that there is. Everything is just too random and chaotic absent that.”

Not surprisingly, many who watched the finale saw a light at the end of the series for Walt. One genius of the show (there were so many) is that it co-opted viewers into rooting for Mr. White — as Walt's co-conspirator Jesse Pinkman always called his onetime high school teacher — no matter how low he sank.

So despite the trail of carnage and ruined lives that Walt left behind, the hope that he would find grace at the end, that his death would somehow sanctify, was overpowering.

Critics as varied as Emily Bazelon in Slate and Allen St. John in Forbes declared that "Breaking Bad" was ultimately a "love story" because White managed to do what he set out to do in the first season: He found a way to provide for his family, and at the end he finally confessed his original sin in becoming the drug kingpin dubbed Heisenberg.

"I did it for me," as he tells his devastated wife, Skyler. "I liked it. I was good at it. And I was really ... alive."

Writer Sonny Bunch even saw Gilligan slyly turning White into Jesus Christ — the wounds in Walt's hand and side, his reference to the view of the Sangre de Cristo (Blood of Christ) mountains, his "sacrificing himself to save the people he loved," his cruciform death pose. White also "made peace with those who had wronged him and those he had wronged (one way or another) so as to prepare himself for the afterlife."

Well, "making peace" may be pushing it. White actually used his intellectual gifts one last time to build a Rube Goldberg killing machine and orchestrate a bloody — if improbable, without divine aid — denouement that destroyed all his enemies.

"His moment of clarity at the end doesn't make up for all the hubris of Heisenberg," Bazelon wrote. "But it did mean I could wholeheartedly root for his scheme of revenge."

And that's the theological problem. White used evil to the very end to accomplish something good. But Walter Wink would not approve. Wink, a theologian who died last year, called this rationale the "myth of redemptive violence" — the very antithesis of the Christian message but the "dominant religion" of the modern world.

"The belief that violence 'saves' is so successful because it doesn't seem to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It's what works. It seems inevitable, the last and, often, the first resort in conflicts," Wink wrote. "The gods favor those who conquer. Conversely, whoever conquers must have the favor of the gods."

Moreover, Walt's "confession" at the end was hardly repentance. He did not give himself up to the authorities or allow himself to be publicly humiliated. He died the way he wanted, caressing the cold steel of the meth lab cookers the way Gollum — the

creepy, corrupted Hobbit of “The Lord of the Rings” series — fondled the magical golden ring.

“He’s patting his Precious, in Lord of the Rings terms,” Gilligan said after the finale. “He’s with the thing he seems to love the most in the world, which is his work and his meth lab and he just doesn’t care about being caught because he knows he’s on the way out. So it could be argued that he pays for his sins at the end or it could just as easily be argued that he gets away with it.”

Even if White does get away with it by cheating earthly justice, his ending can be seen as instructive — as long as it is viewed as a cautionary tale rather than a model for living, and dying.

And you have to appreciate the fact that Gilligan ended the show so clearly and cleanly.

Other television anti-heroes have faded to an ambiguous black, like Tony Soprano, or suffered a premature demise at the hands of network executives before we could learn their true destiny — think Tom Kane in “Boss,” or Al Swearengen in “Deadwood.” And we still await the fate of compromised characters like Nucky Thompson in “Boardwalk Empire,” Don Draper in “Mad Men,” and Frank Underwood in “House of Cards.” Not to mention most of the cast of “Game of Thrones.”

We all find ourselves rooting for them. But rooting for them to do what, exactly? The moral logic that White used to engineer the ending of “Breaking Bad” is the same rationale he used to start his meth business. And we saw where that led.