Opinion
News



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

October 9, 2020
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Alas, never again shall I be able to hear the great torch song "Don't Cry for Me Argentina," from the musical "Evita" the same way thanks to the Lincoln Project, the effort by a group of Republicans to defeat Donald Trump. They have rewritten some, not all, of the words and set the tune to images of the president. To weep. To laugh.

At Commonweal, E.J. Dionne thinks that Catholic social doctrine holds what the country needs, and it will surprise no one that I agree. But he does something else that I want to especially note. While most of his article is a critique of conservative culture war Catholicism of the kind epitomized by, for example, Attorney General Bill Barr and Archbishop Charles Chaput, he also does not let liberals off the hook:

> For their part, religious progressives must recognize their obligation to do all they can on their own side to ease the vicious cycle the culture wars have let loose. They need to make clear (as Biden has) that hostility to religion and, at times, to people of faith themselves, is not only politically

> disastrous but also fundamentally illiberal. It feeds the sorts of arguments that Barr is making and effectively concedes the Christian tradition to reactionaries.

Can I get an "Amen!" I hope that Dionne will, in the future, expound upon his argument that the church's social doctrines are "radical, because they offer a sharp critique of the status quo and its assumptions." Which assumptions? Is he making an anthropological point or a political philosophy point or both?

Of all the really terrible, creepy things Republicans do, one of the worst is to make it harder for people to vote. At Politico, a report on Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis in Florida, trying to prevent any extension of the deadline to register to vote. He claims the integrity of the election would be cast into doubt if the state extended the deadline. He does not explain how such doubt would emerge. This small-d anti-democratic stance is repugnant to our democracy, and I hope the GOP pays a price for it such that we never, ever witness it again.

Advertisement

At Church Life Journal from the McGrath Center at Notre Dame, Michael Baxter looks at the fascinating history of religious liberty claims in the past 30 years, starting with the *Employment Division* v. *Smith* decision that limited religious freedom (the decision was written by Justice Antonin Scalia) through the present. Baxter is not a legal scholar, which is actually helpful here. What is plain to him — that religious freedom is a complicated issue, with a complicated history, not given to easy partisan claims and certainly unsuited for bumper sticker slogans — is a necessary reminder to those who see the defense of religious liberty as the first obligation of Catholics in the public square and to those who put the phrase in scare quotes.

I missed this column by Thomas Frank when it was published at The Guardian last month, but am glad he sent it to me. Frank examines how the right hijacked the word "populism" to align it with their nationalistic, racist ideology when the word previously had a long and proud leftie association. Back in the late '80s, after the defeat of Michael Dukakis, I remember saying the Democrats need to reclaim populism if they want to win, while holding on to their liberalism to make sure what they say is true. I now realize that populism is about more than winning elections; it

is about avoiding the La Brea tarpits of elite opinion. Delighted to see Frank make the argument so cogently.

I watch Fox News so you don't have to. This week, however, I confess this yoke was easy, this burden was light. As Trump's campaign crumbled, they couldn't very well talk about him. Still less could they discuss COVID-19. So, and I kid you not, on Tuesday night, Sean Hannity began discussing ... drumroll ... Hillary Clinton's emails. I couldn't stop laughing. Or crying. Or both.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

Editor's note: *Don't miss out on Michael Sean Winters' latest. Sign up and we'll let you know when he publishes new Distinctly Catholic columns.*