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Pope's climate anxiety is valid

Francis shows more realism than many politicians

Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment should not come as a surprise. But to the Pope's alarm at global warming and climate change and its harm to the poorest among us makes for some politicians uncomfortable. He is not someone whose values they want to attack.

In a richly ironic response to Francis' pending announcement, Republican presidential candidate Jeb Bush, who is Catholic, said, "I think religion ought to be about making us better as people and less about things that end up getting in the political realm."

For the past 25 years, the Republican Party has been all about linking religion and politics. Jeb Bush's father, George H.W. Bush, did a 180-degree turn on abortion in order to be Ronald Reagan's running mate in 1980. Bush moved from pro-choice to pro-life on short notice.

The larger point is that a universal church *ought* to have values that touch on the state of the environment. On Jan. 8, 2001, the Catholic bishops of a large western region issued a paper titled "The Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good." Its authors hailed from Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana and the province of British Columbia.

The bishops' paper was a joy to read — a highly articulate and well-reasoned argument. Then-Archbishop of Oregon John Vlazny spoke eloquently about the paper in an Astoria presentation to Columbia Forum.

More recently in June, Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori joined with the Episcopal-Anglican-Lutheran leadership of Canada and the United States in a letter to President Obama and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper concerning the review and future of the Columbia River Treaty. Their letter draws attention to the treaty's impact on the ecosystem, fisheries and people.

Church leaders' concerns about climate change are welcome, because they introduce a measure of human caring that is sometimes lacking in the gospel of the big environmental groups.

It would be amusing, if it were not tragic, to observe intelligent men and women playing a game with the reality of climate change on behalf of petrochemical merchants. In last Saturday's edition of *The Wall Street Journal*, Peggy Noonan anticipated Pope Francis' paper on climate change. She expressed the hope that he would not wade into something which is not "settled science" – the code words that climate deniers use.

It is curious the *Journal* indulges in this game, because its hard-headed business readers know better. The Weyerhaeuser Co. has had a climate change strategy for more than a decade. The CIA and the Defense Department have long ago created documents anticipating the strategic implications of global warming and climate change. Coca-Cola has a climate change strategy.

If one's calling is about caring for allpeople, especially the dispossessed, it is essential to raise an alarm about the effects of climate change. In that matter, apparently Pope Francis is being more of a leader than his parishioner, the politician Jeb Bush.

European traditions on the North Coast

Trolls, Vikings and everything Scandinavian on tap this weekend

This weekend is the most significant in the calendar for those in the community with Scandinavian heritage.

The Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival has been in existence for approaching half a century. It's a splendid opportunity for a gathering of the core families whose heritage comes from Finland, Norway, Sweden, Iceland and Denmark. And every year, the three-day celebration of these European traditions offers newcomers an insight into a large element of the cultural foundation of the North Coast.

Over the years, a melting pot of nationalities built the greater Astoria area — and, of course, we include neighboring Naselle, Wash. But a significant core was provided by hardy Scandinavians who left the fjords and mountains of northern Europe seeking a fresh start in the New World.

Here they found the opportunities to earn their livelihoods harvesting the region's fishing and logging resources, just like they did back home, while creating family dynasties in the free environment of the American West.

Music and dancing characterize much of the festival's celebratory tone, and to eat, there will be lefse, meatballs with red cabbage, cookies and other tasty fare.

Events begin at the Clatsop County Fairgrounds Friday with the crowning of the queen and the burning of the hexes for good luck. As always, the festival's royal court members have links to Scandinavia through their parents or grandparents, and this year's court includes Astoria exchange student Kristina Kjellberg from Sweden.

It's appropriate, too, that the concurrent Astoria Music Festival is celebrating the 150th anniversary of the birth of Jean Sibelius, the classical composer whose works epitomized the Finnish people's struggle for freedom. The festival's past president, Leena Riker of Gearhart, attended his 1957 funeral as a University of Helsinki student and speaks eloquently about Sibelius' contribution to her birth nation's heritage.

So, as the saying goes, now it the time to get in touch with your inner Viking — but watch out for those swift-running trolls this weekend. Enjoy the festival and be sure to thank hard-working organizers like Loran Mathews and Janet Bowler, plus the the Astoria Scandinavian Heritage Association, whose leaders raise money to bring the talented entertainers from their homelands.

Check out Coast Weekend Thursday for full details of this year's Astoria Scandinavian Midsummer Festival.

The GOP's blinkered contenders

By FRANK BRUNI
New York Times News Service

SAN DIEGO — The Republican Party keeps announcing its new modernity, declaring its new inclusiveness, swearing that it has changed and then showing that it hasn't.

Witness Rand Paul, who is supposed to be one of its fresher, unconventional faces.

Frank Bruni

He spoke at a dinner here Saturday, in a blazer and khakis instead of a suit, and once again presented himself as a Republican unusually in touch with the sensibilities of younger voters, especially concerned about the welfare of minorities and uniquely positioned to expand the party's reach.

It was a refreshing pitch — until a medieval metaphor revealed an antiquated mindset.

He was describing people's need to feel that their personal information in cyberspace is as safe from indiscriminate government snooping as the documents in their dwellings have long been, and he mentioned the adage that "a man's house is his castle."

Then he updated it: "Now we would say a man or a wife's home is their castle."

A man or a wife's?

Aiming for a less sexist, more sensitive vocabulary, he came up with a more sexist, less sensitive one, casting women as auxiliaries of men.

This was no way to rebrand the party, no way to retire any image of it as a preserve for old white guys.

But it was emblematic. For all the party's self-congratulation about a field of official and unofficial presidential candidates who depart from the fusty norm, the truth is that they don't depart nearly enough.

Yes, they're a racially diverse group, including Bobby Jindal, who is Indian-American; Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz, who are Cuban-American; and Ben Carson, who is African-American.

Yes, Rubio and Bush speak Spanish, as Bush did in Miami on Monday during his formal campaign announcement, which had the multiethnic flourish of a Coca-Cola Super Bowl commercial.

AP Photo/Jim Cole

Republican presidential candidate Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., shakes hands with Jodi Nelson during a campaign stop at Mary Ann's Diner June 6 in Derry, N.H.

Yes, Cruz and Rubio are both under 45. Rubio in fact looks young enough to be Bernie Sanders' grandson. He advertises an affinity for hip-hop and rap. He name-checks Pitbull and Nicki Minaj.

Paul, an ophthalmologist, highlights his travels to Central America to perform eye surgery on indigent Guatemalans. He cuts his own hair. And he urges criminal justice reforms, including lighter punishments for marijuana possession and use.

This was no way to rebrand the party.

But he came across as more backward-acting than forward-looking during that strange sequence of interviews with female journalists a few months ago, when he admonished and interrupted them.

And his Republican rivals, beneath their playlists and campaign choreography, aren't so impressively in touch with the times either.

Although more than 70 percent of American adults under 35 support same-sex marriage, not one candidate in the sprawling Republican field has explicitly taken that position, and most have expressed impassioned opposition.

Although an increasing fraction of American adults, including about a third of those under 35, pronounce themselves religiously unaffiliated, there's no sense of that drift in the emphatic religious testimonials of most of the Republican candidates, including Bush, Rubio and Scott Walker, who introduces himself as a preacher's son.

Almost all of them are at odds with young Americans' belief in climate change and stated desire for immigration reform.

And none of the leading contenders has a pitch that strongly reflects a recent Gallup poll's finding that more Americans label themselves socially liberal than at any point in the last 16 years. These Americans finally match the percentage of those who call themselves socially conservative.

Where's the Republican presidential contender for them?

Where's the Republican candidate who can enter into an important, necessary debate about the size, role and efficacy of government without being weighed down by a set of statements and positions on social issues that seem tailored to placate the religious right and to survive the primaries, not to capture voters in the center? You're not allowed to say George Pataki unless he reaches 5 percent in the polls. Last I checked, he's about 4 points shy of that.

Yet again there's a void, and Hillary Clinton and her advisers have certainly noticed it. That awareness informed her own speech Saturday, on Roosevelt Island, where she made many references to young Americans, to LGBT Americans, to minorities, to working women. Her remarks constituted a road map of the precise terrain that Democrats want to keep — or put — beyond Republicans' reach.

And she sought to counteract the familiarity of her presence with the novelty of her promise. She pictured a woman in the Oval Office.

On the other side of the country, Paul pictured a woman in a castle — and all he saw was a wife. The ophthalmologist needs better vision. So does his party, if it wants passage across the moat to the White House.

How to evaluate a K-12 teacher

By JOE NOCERA
New York Times News Service

This is the second column I've written about Deborah Loewenberg Ball, the dean of the University of Michigan's School of Education.

Ball believes the training that teachers get while they are in school needs to be drastically improved.

Last year, I wrote about her effort to develop a professional training curriculum that would allow beginning teachers to be far better grounded in their craft than they are now.

Recently, I learned about another effort she has led, which I also think deserves wider attention. It tackles one of the most divisive topics in K-12 education: how to evaluate teachers so that the best can be rewarded and the worst fired.

In New York — a state where the issue has been especially contentious — Gov. Andrew Cuomo earlier this year pushed through legislation that calls for student test scores to count for as much as 50 percent of a teacher's evaluation, up from the current 20 percent. The teachers' unions were incensed, believing that test scores are a simplistic and unfair means of assessing teachers. So were many parents, who joined a boycott movement that resulted in an estimated 165,000 students opting out of this year's standardized tests.

I wish I could tell you that this story has a happy ending, but it doesn't.

A teacher evaluation system "is only good if the teachers respect it and trust it," says Vicki Phillips, a director of education for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Teachers are convinced that evaluation systems that overly rely on test scores are punitive, which the political rhetoric often underscores. For instance, Cuomo's stated reason for changing the state's teacher evaluation was that some 96 percent of teachers got top grades under the old process. He scoffed at those results as "baloney." That's hardly going to get teachers to buy into your new evaluation system.

Joe Nocera

Which brings me back to Michigan. In 2011, the state Legislature there changed the tenure law, making it easier to fire incompetent teachers. But it also set up the Michigan Council for Educator Effectiveness, which was charged with coming up with its first-ever statewide evaluation system. Ball was named chairwoman of the council. Two years later, it came back with its recommendations.

The first thing I noticed about the council's recommendations is that they completely avoid the divisive political language that has alienated teachers. Instead of casting teacher evaluation as primarily being about getting rid of bad teachers, they instead recast it to put the emphasis on teacher improvement. An evaluation system that stresses improvement instead of punishment has a much better chance of being embraced by teachers.

Such an emphasis isn't just good politics. It's also an important way to help make schools better. "Very few teachers can't improve," Ball told me recently. And most teachers want to improve — but have no means of getting useful feedback. The council's idea was that the evaluations could be used not just to rid the system of incompetent teachers — though it would certainly do that — but also to give all the other teachers critical feedback. It also envisions transforming professional development, which is now mostly a wasteland, into a mechanism to put that feedback into practice.

There are two fundamental pieces to the Michigan council's plan. The first piece is teacher observation. In most schools, it's the principal who observes the teacher, often haphazardly, and rates him or her based on personal biases, which may or may not be sound. Ball and her colleagues would instead rely on observers who have been trained in using certain tools that have been proved effective. These observations would be the basis for the teacher's feedback — feedback meant to encourage and help, rather than threaten.

The second piece is what the council calls evaluating "student growth." Here the point would be not to measure student achievement in absolute terms — Does Johnny read at a fourth-grade level? — but rather to measure whether Johnny had made a year's worth of improvement from the level he was reading at when he was in the third grade. This would be a more accurate representation of the difference the teacher made, and would take into account the wide range of learning levels teachers often have to contend with.

Some of this growth evaluation would undoubtedly be done through tests. But not all of it, or even most of it. "You have to look at objectives for students for the year and see if they made progress," says Ball. There are ways to do that that don't require standardized testing.

I wish I could tell you that this story has a happy ending, but it doesn't. Legislation that embodied the work of the council failed to pass the Michigan Legislature in the last session. More recently, the chairman of a related Senate committee, Phil Pavlov, has essentially tossed the council's work aside in favor of "local control."

That is Michigan's loss. But perhaps other states and school districts can look at the work of the Michigan council and learn from it. In which case, it could still be America's gain.