

Cultural Myths; Cultural Falsehoods

by Rev. Joe Connolly

“Also in their company were some of the women who followed Jesus, Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as some of the brothers and sisters of Jesus. With one mind, together, they devoted themselves to constant prayer.”
— Acts 1:14.

Here’s a warning about my comments today: they rely heavily on some obscure history of the 1950s and 60s. You’ve been warned now. I hope to make it as entertaining as possible. O.K.? (Slight pause.)

You have heard me say hundreds of times I was born and grew up in New York City. Other than my time in the Army I lived nowhere else until I was 40. Given my age, that means my single digit and teen years were obviously spent in that city in the 1950s and 1960s.

In that era one of the important metropolitan radio stations was WOR. It began broadcasting in 1922 and is one of the oldest commercial radio operations in America. It is so old it had only those three call letters— WOR—not the more usual four.

In the 50s and 60s the station was doing something most people think was invented in the 1990s. The format WOR used back then was what we today call talk radio.

Now, I know the names I am about to rattle off will be meaningless to many of you. Take my word for this: they were well known celebrities in the 50s and 60s.

The WOR morning show was *Rambling with Gambling* which aired continuously from March 1925 to September 2000 across three generations of hosts. John B. Gambling was the first host. He handed it over to a son, John A. Gambling, who was followed by grandson John R. Gambling.

Throughout the day the WOR airwaves were filled with people who simply talked. After the Gambling show came *Breakfast with Dorothy and Dick*.

Dorothy Kilgallen and Richard (Dick) Kollmar were a high profile couple. Kilgallen was a well known reporter who came to prominence in the 1930s covering notorious crime cases. Kollmar was a Broadway producer.

The broadcast originated in their apartment on East 68th Street. At the breakfast table each day— breakfast served by their butler, Julius— they talked about any high society event they attended the previous night and/or chatted with celebrity friends.

I hope you realize that kind of talk radio has simply moved to television. This is essentially what you get these days on *Live, The View, The Talk*— pretty much the same idea in daytime television— smart people saying smart things about what’s happening, interviews of celebrity guests, news-makers. Indeed, cable is called cable news but it’s really cable talk.

Back to WOR for a moment— some of you might remember a celerity named Arlene Francis. Along with Kilgallen she was a panelist on the television program *What’s My Line* in the 1950s right through the 1970s and did stints on the NBC radio and television networks. She *also* had a talk show on WOR. [1]

I once heard her interview an author. I do not, unfortunately, remember the fellows name. His parents were in

the foreign service.

When he was young, he said, his parents got moved to a different location every two years. Moving every two years is still a common practice in the foreign service.

In any case he therefore and obviously attended a grade school in a different country about every two years. His parents, thinking the experience would be good for him, always placed him a local school. They wanted him to be exposed to what was happening in the country in which they were serving, exposed to the local culture.

What he said about this educational journey in different countries stuck with me and still fascinates me today. He said when the lessons turned to looking at the history of the country in which he currently resided, it became evident the same exact and singular message got transmitted in every last classroom in every last country.

Here's the message: in whatever country he sat, that country considered itself the center of the world, the center of the universe, the most important country on the planet. Even at a very young age it did not take him long to figure out this was a cultural myth.

He also figured out it was simply false— a cultural truth perhaps— *a cultural truth perhaps*— but factually false. After all, each and every one of these countries could not possibly be the most important country on the planet. Could it? (Slight pause.)

These words are from Luke/Acts in the section commonly called Acts: “Also in their company were some of the women who followed Jesus, Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as some of the brothers and sisters of Jesus. With one mind, together, they devoted themselves to constant prayer.” (Slight pause.)

The example I just gave— that each of those countries believed it was the center of the universe— is an illustration of ‘confirmation bias.’ Confirmation bias is the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, recall information in a way that confirms one’s own preexisting beliefs.

People display confirmation bias when they gather or remember information selectively or interpret it in a biased way. Here’s the short version: when confirmation bias sets in people will simply pay no attention to fact.

And sometimes they will pay no attention to a fact in an irrational way. Here’s the fact; oh, I won’t pay attention even though this might hurt me— irrational. they will pay no attention to a fact in an irrational way and then bias takes charge. [2] Indeed, that the country in which you happen to live is the greatest in the world, the center of the universe, fits right in with that concept.

But how does that concept fit in with the passage from Acts? This is a given: we all have opinions about Scripture. I plead guilty on that count.

However, it is also true sometimes those opinions fall prey to confirmation bias, especially cultural bias. It would be foolish of me to not plead guilty on that count also.

However, one of the things I try to do— I’m not always successful but I try— is to leave any confirmation bias I might bring to the study of Scripture aside. Indeed, I try to do that and I hope my journey into a Scriptural passage is as free from confirmation bias, cultural bias, as I can possibly make it.

As to our confirmation bias, bias we might have which is rooted in the cultural— tell me, how often have you seen a picture depicting Jesus. And how often in the pictures you’ve seen is Jesus displayed as being tall with

blue eyes and blond hair? Really? Christ with blue eyes and blond hair?

Do you know where Jesus was born? And tall? Five foot eight would have been considered very tall 2000 years ago.

That brings me to the fact that this passage clearly states Jesus had brothers and sisters. What? Jesus had brothers and sisters?

I suspect a lot of people simply ignore those words. Why? Unless I am mistaken there is a specific cultural bias rooted in conformation bias about Jesus which says Jesus was an only child.

Therefore, some people refuse to believe these words are there or exist because many people have that cultural belief, that preconceived notion, that Jesus was an only child. Hence, these words cannot possibly be there. Right? (Slight pause.)

My next point should be obvious. I want to suggest the writers of Scripture were not immune from cultural bias. Sometimes it's easy to pick out that cultural bias. For instance, there is readily identifiable cultural bias in some of the letters attributed to the Apostle Paul.

But there are letters attributed to Paul which we know were written after Paul was dead. These are what scholars call the Deutero-Pauline letters.

Much more than Paul ever did, those later works written by others enshrine the patriarchal system of Rome as the only appropriate social structure. However, the true writings of Paul name specific women among the leadership of the early church. That would not happen in the Roman patriarchal system. But Paul approves of women in leadership.

So, that there is identifiable bias found in the text and that we, ourselves, bring bias to the text and impose it on the text leads to one key question. Given those factors what should our take-away from Scripture be? Put another way, can we identify the bias of God? (Slight pause.)

I hope after my years of preaching here you might be able to answer that question since what I am about to say is the answer I have often offered. The bias of God is simple to state. God loves us. God want to covenant with us.

Indeed, I have said this here before. If for us the love of God does not leap off each page of Scripture then we are reading it wrong.

And the true bias of God is not just that God loves us and wants to covenant with us. God invites us to walk in ways of faith, sharing peace, joy, freedom, equity, hope, trust, love with *all* people— that's all people, perhaps not just the ones in our country, the center of the universe.

This is the bias of God: love all people. This is what God wants for us: walk in ways of faith, sharing peace, joy, freedom, equity, hope, trust, love with *all* people. Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “We humans live with an interesting tension. It’s the tension of needing to be individuals, needing to be ourselves, needing to be who we are and living in community because we need community. There is no question about that. But when we have community the question arises: ‘How do we fit in? How do we make that work?’ And I think that’s certainly one of the issues that is raised by Scripture.”

BENEDICTION: The work and the will of God is placed before us. Further, we are called to be faithful and seek to do God’s will and work. In so doing, may we love God so much, that we love nothing else too much. May we be so in awe of God, that we are in awe of no one else and nothing else. Amen.

[1] This is based on my memories but support can be found at these places:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WOR_%28AM%29

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arlene_Francis

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confirmation_bias