

Counterscript: Living with the elusive God

by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [November 29, 2005](#) issue

I have been thinking about the ways in which the Bible is a critical alternative to the enmeshments in which we find ourselves in the church and in society. I have not, of course, escaped these enmeshments myself, but in any case I offer a series of 19 theses about the Bible in the church.

1. Everybody has a script. People live their lives by a script that is sometimes explicit but often implicit. That script may be one of the great metanarratives created by Karl Marx or Adam Smith or it may be an unrecognized tribal mantra like, “My dad always said . . . ” The practice of the script evokes a self, yields a sense of purpose and provides security. When one engages in psychotherapy, the therapy often has to do with reexamining the script—or completely scuttling the script in favor of a new one, a process that we call conversion.

As the self is organized by a script, so are communities. And leaders of a community are skilled in appealing to that script.

2. We are scripted by a process of nurture, formation and socialization that might go under the rubric of liturgy. Some of the liturgy is intentional work, much of it is incidental; but all of it, especially for the young and especially for the family, involves modeling the way the world “really is.” The script is inhaled along with every utterance and every gesture, because the script-bestowing community is engaged in the social construction of a distinct reality. A case in point is the observation of Mark Douglas that regular table prayers of thanksgiving are a primal way in which to challenge the market view of the supply and movement of valuable goods (see his book *Confessing Christ in the 21st Century*).

3. The dominant script of both selves and communities in our society, for both liberals and conservatives, is the script of therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism that permeates every dimension of our common life.

- I use the term *therapeutic* to refer to the assumption that there is a product or a treatment or a process to counteract every ache and pain and discomfort and trouble, so that life may be lived without inconvenience.
- I use the term *technological*, following Jacques Ellul, to refer to the assumption that everything can be fixed and made right through human ingenuity; there is no issue so complex or so remote that it cannot be solved.
- I say *consumerist*, because we live in a culture that believes that the whole world and all its resources are available to us without regard to the neighbor, that assumes more is better and that “if you want it, you need it.” Thus there is now an advertisement that says: “It is not something you don’t need; it is just that you haven’t thought of it.”
- The *militarism* that pervades our society exists to protect and maintain the system and to deliver and guarantee all that is needed for therapeutic technological consumerism. This militarism occupies much of the church, much of the national budget and much of the research program of universities.

It is difficult to imagine life in our society outside the reach of this script; it is everywhere reiterated and legitimated.

4. This script—enacted through advertising, propaganda and ideology, especially in the several liturgies of television—promises to make us safe and happy. Therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism pervades our public life and promises us security and immunity from every threat. And if we shall be safe, then we shall be happy, for who could watch the ads for cars and beers and deodorants and give thought to such matters as the trade deficit or homelessness or the residue of anger and insanity left by the war or by destruction of the environment? This script, with its illusion of safety and happiness, invites life in a bubble that is absent of critical reflection.

5. That script has failed. I know this is not the conclusion that all would draw. It is, however, a lesson that is learned by the nations over and over again. It is clear to all but the right-wing radio talk people and the sponsoring neoconservatives that the reach of the American military in global ambition has served only to destabilize and to produce new and deep threats to our society. The charade of a national security state has left us completely vulnerable to the whim of the very enemies that our security posture has itself evoked. A by-product of such attempts at security,

moreover, has served in astonishing ways to evoke acrimony in the body politic that makes our democratic decision-making processes nearly unworkable.

We are not safe, and we are not happy. The script is guaranteed to produce new depths of insecurity and new waves of unhappiness. And in response to new depths of insecurity and new waves of unhappiness, a greater resolve arises to close the deal according to the script, which produces ever new waves and new depths.

6. Health depends, for society and for its members, on disengaging from and relinquishing the failed script. This is a truth that is exceedingly difficult to utter, and even more difficult to imagine acting upon across the sociopolitical spectrum. And besides that, we are ambivalent about disengaging and relinquishing, because we are indeed well-off, comfortable, and by any standards better off than most of the world can imagine.

7. It is the task of the church and its ministry to detach us from that powerful script. This has been the work of the biblical tradition since Moses and the subsequent work of the Deuteronomists, the prophets and the scribes. Moses had to make the case that the pharaonic arrangement of brickyard quotas was not the true destiny of the Israelite community. In the text we can see that such a descripting was a risky calling, entailing repeated challenges to his leadership and recurring proposals for a return to that exploitative Egyptian arrangement (Exod. 16:3; Num. 11:4-6). Later the Jerusalem establishment was caught in its own illusion of security; the prophets repeatedly urged Israel to give up its illusion of entitlement and to face the reality of covenantal requirements. And of course Jesus delineated a regime change in Mark 1:14-15 that was nothing less than a call to descript from Rome and from what had become an exploitative religious system.

8. The task of descripting, relinquishment and disengagement is undertaken through the steady, patient, intentional articulation of an alternative script that we testify will indeed make us safe and joyous. We have become so jaded in the church—most particularly in the liberal church—that we have forgotten what has been entrusted to us. We have forgotten that the script entrusted to us is really an alternative and not an echo. Liberals tend to get so engaged in the issues of the day, urgent and important as those issues are, that we forget that behind such issues is a metanarrative that is not about our particular social passion but about the world beyond our control. The claim of that alternative script is that there is at work among us a Truth that makes us safe, that makes us

free, that makes us joyous in a way that the comfort and ease of the consumer economy cannot even imagine. It would make a difference if the church were candid in its acknowledgment that that is the work to which it is called.

9. The alternative script is rooted in the Bible and enacted through the tradition of the church. Many of us have become embarrassed about that ancient script because of our awareness of the ideological failures that are present in it. We are too ready to hand it over to the waiting arms of the dominant ideology; we have given up on the hard work of hearing and speaking the alternative message in what Karl Barth termed “the strange new world within the Bible.” Barth understood that we cannot find in the Bible many of the things for which we look. But what we find there is an alternative world, an alternative network of symbols and signs that stitched together yield a coherence that subverts dominant scripts, a world in which newness keeps welling up.

10. The defining factor of the alternative script is the God of the Bible, who, fleshed in Jesus, is variously Lord and Savior of Israel and Creator of heaven and Earth, and whom we name as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The alternative script is about God, about a particular God whose name we know, whose story we tell. The historians of Israelite religion have traced all of the borrowings and appropriations from ancient Near Eastern culture and religion. They have in general concluded that for all the borrowings and appropriations there is something inexplicable and underived, something originary, in the God of Israel who blew over waters of disorder, who summoned Abraham and Sarah abruptly, and who came in a burning bush to give Moses an unbearable assignment.

All of us, of course, have been through and still live in the crisis of the Enlightenment; we find God to be an embarrassment whom we siphon off into intimate family life because we cannot imagine that God might be present in the public domain. We fear to be frontal because we do not want to sound like silly supernaturalists; we hedge and duck and then wonder why on Easter the assertion of the resurrection is without context, and so our Easter assertion is more awkward than grace-filled.

The script entrusted to us knows all about such awkwardness. Paul, even among his “enlightened” colleagues, refused awkwardness, voiced the script and emptied prisons. Thus while we guard against silly supernaturalism, we may from this script join issue with the ideology of the day. For of course the dominant script of

therapeutic technological consumerist militarism is not godless or atheistic. Rather, it offers us a god who has no power to save.

11. The script of this God of power and life is not monolithic, one-dimensional or seamless, and we should not pretend that we have such an easy case to make in telling about this God. The script is flawed in many ways of which we are now aware. It is flawed in its approach to violence, race, gender and even class. But the primary reason that the text is not monolithic, one-dimensional or seamless is not because of such flaws but because the key character is elusive. God is, as Job found, irascible in freedom and pathos-filled in sovereignty, one who traffics in hiddenness and violence. This God does not fit much of our theological preference and certainly does not conform to any of our bourgeois reductionism. This God is the one who keeps life ragged and open, who refuses domestication but who will not let our lives be domesticated either.

In Job 38-41, for example, God seems to know nothing about pastoral sensitivity, for after Job relates in great detail his anguish and pain and bewilderment, Yahweh responds, "Let me tell you about my crocodile." Any pastoral supervisor evaluating this act of ministry would say to Yahweh, "You couldn't stand the pain and you changed the subject."

On the other hand, in Isaiah 41:14, when Israel has complained about feeling like a worm, Yahweh shows acute pastoral sensitivity and says to self-deprecating Israel, "Fear not, worm." Yahweh stays with the subject and does not try to talk Israel out of its diminished self-perception. But we never know for sure.

12. The ragged, disjunctive quality of the counterscript to which we testify cannot be smoothed out. Historical-critical study and doctrinal reductionism have tried to smooth out the text, but that effort betrays the key character. When the script is smoothed out, it becomes flattened, domesticated and uninteresting. More than that, it too easily becomes a neat, weak echo of the dominant script. The way to co-opt the biblical script for any dominant ideology is to flatten and domesticate it so that the key character is made into a patron of conventional truth.

The script to which we are so much inured is all about certitude, privilege and entitlement. But the script of the church and its ministry is not about certitude, privilege or entitlement.

13. The ragged, disputatious character of the counterscript to which we testify is so disputed and polyvalent that its adherents are always tempted to quarrel among themselves. Polyvalence, the fact that in the Bible God speaks in different voices, invites us to choose the part we happen to like. Thus we quibble about whether Jesus said “poor” or “poor in spirit.” We solemnly vote about whether we stand with Leviticus, wherein holiness has to do with sexual regulation, or with Deuteronomy, wherein holiness has to do with concern for justice for widows, orphans and immigrants. This God has spoken differently at different times in a dynamic process. As a consequence there is always something for everyone, and every position we take is readily countered with some other part of the script.

The quarrels we undertake are not only vicious; they are also convenient because they detract us from the main claims of the text, and so undermine the force of the text. Of course it matters what the church decides about sexuality, but in the long run that skirmish or a dozen like it are as nothing before the truth that the therapeutic, technological, military consumerism cannot deliver or keep its promises. All of us—conservatives who are attentive to what the Bible says about sexuality and indifferent to what it says about economics, and liberals who mumble about what the Bible says on sex but emphasize economics—all of us stand under the awareness that the primary commitments of our society amount to a choice of a path of death.

The quarrels we undertake must be kept in perspective, because none of those quarrels concerns this holy character unduly. What counts is that we were not there at the outset of creation and will not be there at the curfew; our life between the outset and the curfew is the gift of the One who calls us not to assault neighbor but to be on our way in wonder, love and praise.

14. The entry point into the counterscript is baptism. From which it follows that the church must recover the generative power of baptism. Baptism, a bold counter-act, means entry into a stream of promise that is free but not cheap. In the ancient liturgy we say, “Do you renounce Satan and all his works?” We do not explicate that phrase but let everyone imagine it as they will. No doubt “Satan and all his works” is taken by some to be Muslims and by some to be homosexuals. At least we leave open the thought that Satan acts subtly and by indirection, perhaps by including us in a dominant narrative that makes promises about security and happiness that cannot be kept.

And so we ask, by inference, “Do you renounce the dominant script?” The issue cannot be put directly; it is, however, latent in this thick moment of holy vows as we watch the splash of the holy water and hear the uncompromising name of the irascible Maker of promises. Baptism creates an alternative context for praise and preaching and for mission.

15. The nurture, formation and socialization into the counterscript with this elusive, irascible God at its center constitute the work of ministry. All those called in the Bible were inducted into this task, and it is not different now. I say this because I think I know many ministers who are filled with despair, who are exhausted from too many tasks, who are riding it out in cynicism, or who work ad hoc without much focus on coherence. Ministry is at best acutely difficult and problematic; it becomes unbearable when there is no large, comprehensive sense of purpose.

We may specialize in and develop various skills and arts in ministry, each of which is urgently important. Thus we value and require skills in preaching, liturgy, education, social action, counseling, administration, stewardship, evangelism and all the rest. These, however, are not ends in themselves. They are instruments in nurture, formation and socialization into an alternative scripting of reality. Nurture is aimed at the embrace of the new script and the relinquishment of the old script. Formation is aimed at receiving and living into an alternative reality and disengaging from the old. Socialization is entering into another world that comes by “switching stories.” Each practice of ministry is to “improve our baptism,” wherein we live with increasing singularity in this alternative script.

16. Ministry is conducted in the awareness that most of us are deeply ambivalent about the alternative script. We do not want to choose decisively between the dominant script of therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism and the counterscript of the elusive, irascible God. We are characteristically double-minded, standing between two scripts the way Elijah found Israel standing between Baal and Yahweh. And of course we know what happens in our double-mindedness: “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matt. 6:24). We are filled with anxiety: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” (Matt. 6:25).

The anxiety about our double-mindedness makes us fearful, strident and adversarial. This anxiety causes us to enlist as red or blue ministers in red or blue churches. It is our anxiety that precludes the ease of sabbath, the dalliance of birds, the leisure time of lilies: “Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” (Matt. 6:26).

There is, of course, an antidote, even if it is given in patriarchal form: “ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things” (Matt. 6:32). And we are left, postanxiety, with only God’s realm and God’s righteousness.

17. The good news is that our ambivalence as we stand between scripts is precisely the primal venue for the work of God’s Spirit. God’s Spirit will work where it will and accomplish its purposes (John 3:8). But humanly speaking, it is in our ambivalence that the spirit in us can be stirred and we can be opened to new possibilities. When we cover over and deny our ambivalence, our faith grows hard and we find ourselves committed with ideological passion and without the grace to rethink.

Surely one of the crucial tasks of ministry is to name the deep ambiguity that besets us, and to create a venue for waiting for God’s newness among us. This work is not to put people in crisis. The work is to name the crisis that people are already in, the crisis that evokes resistance and hostility when it is brought to the surface and named.

- God may yet lead us anew where liberals and conservatives can disrupt the shrillness long enough to admit that variously we are frightened by alternative patterns of sexuality. We do not want to kill all gays as the book of Leviticus teaches, but we are in fact uneasy about changes that seem so large.
- God may yet lead us anew when conservatives and liberals can interrupt our passion for consumer goods and lower taxes long enough to admit that we believe neighbors should be cared for, even with taxes. We have a passion for social programs but are nonetheless aware of being taxed excessively, and it causes us alarm.
- God may yet lead us so that liberals and conservatives can stop the loudness to know that the divestment that costs us nothing is too easy, whether directed at

Israel or the Palestinians; the core divestment to which we are first called comes closer to our own entitlements. The Spirit has always been, for the church and beyond the church, “a way out of no way.”

The church and its pastors await the gift of newness from the spirit. One of the ways in which the church and its pastors do that is that they consistently give voice and visibility to our common ambivalence whereby we are given a chance for rechoosing. The Spirit is wind and not wall. It is possibility and not coercion. It is opportunity and not threat. Ministry is for truth telling about the shape we are in. And that truth telling makes us free.

18. Ministry and mission entail managing that inescapable ambivalence that is the human predicament in faithful, generative ways. Managing ambivalence is not manipulating it toward preferred ends. It is management for truth telling, waiting and receiving newness. The work is the slow, steady work of ministry so that we, personally and communally, are able to renounce old scripts of death and enter new scripts of life. The hallmark of the church is not certitude; it is openness to the Spirit. In the book of Acts, after the apostles preached the gospel of Jesus Christ with all the certitude they could muster, there was still a waiting and a big leap beyond themselves.

Moving beyond ourselves is made possible only by the Spirit. We do not go beyond ourselves when we adhere to the dominant script. And the movement beyond ourselves in the church is not possible if the church’s script only imitates the dominant script.

19. The work of ministry is indispensable. The point of ministry is not that the church may prosper but that that the world may live (and not die) and rejoice (and not cower). Only the church in its better days—and the synagogue and the mosque on their better days—is able to mediate irascible holiness, evoke consequent ambivalence, manage that ambivalence toward newness, and then wait.