

The most-read In the World posts

January 3, 2016

Here are Steve Thorngate's most-read posts of the year:

- 1) **[Why is John Oliver's televangelism segment about the IRS?](#)** The government is almost always reluctant to distinguish between naughty churches and nice ones, and for a really good reason: the separation of church and state.
- 2) **[Wait, why is Ben Carson a vegetarian?](#)** At the risk of going all Get Religion over nothing: it's a little weird to read articles about Ben Carson's vegetarianism that fail to mention that the presidential candidate is a member of a church that promotes vegetarianism.
- 3) **[When "religious freedom" means the opposite.](#)** Insisting that a government office answer to the law rather than to a given official's religious beliefs isn't de-prioritizing religious freedom in favor of something else. It *is* religious freedom.
- 4) **[James Holmes didn't get off easy.](#)** Death-row inmates get a lot of appeals, and court-appointed lawyers to do the appealing. LWOP prisoners are basically left to rot.
- 5) **[Are Christians called to be \*always\* countercultural?](#)** I have some sympathy for the idea of counterculturalism as a first principle; as a young musician I was at least as invested in being bohemian as I was in actually writing songs. But I don't think this works for the church.
- 6) **[What kind of allegiance does a flag demand?](#)** While flipping the order of the American flag and the Christian flag makes its point, it makes it using the language of nationalism, conquest, and civil authority—not exactly the way of Jesus.
- 7) **[Decline and its complexities.](#)** There's little for us mainliners to celebrate in this new Pew study. The numbers are clearer, however, than the reasons for them.
- 8) **[The freedom to practice religion without empathy.](#)** It's one thing to appeal to our difficult but important tradition of religious freedom. It's quite another to appeal to the notion that Christians as a group are somehow a persecuted minority.

**9) Still seeking an ecumenical spirit on baptism.** “The Christian community needs to have a conversation about baptism,” says Baptist pastor Rodney Kennedy. We've had one, actually.

**10) House of Cards has become a less funny, even less realistic The West Wing.** *The West Wing's* advantages are obvious: more feels, less murder. What's weird is that *House of Cards* doesn't really deliver on the other side of the ledger.

**11) Obama's entirely mild prayer breakfast speech.** Chuck Todd may be right: Obama doesn't like the National Prayer Breakfast, so he uses his speech to stir up trouble there. I don't like it either. But it's astonishing that this counts as trouble.

**12) Am I middle class? I don't feel rich.** In American culture and discourse, we tend to glorify the middle, from religious moderates to political centrists to middle-class earners. This terminology isn't always benign.

**13) Holy water glasses for holy people.** I'm not among those rolling my eyes at Rep. Bob Brady for seeing something holy in a glass of water. Where I part ways with Brady is over the fact that it had to be *the pope's* water glass.

**14) Inequality isn't just about the 1 percent.** Framing inequality the way Bernie Sanders does puts the wild success of the superrich in sharp relief. But it also lets the regular rich off the hook.

**15) These Soviet spies understand how serious baptism is.** The conflict *The Americans* has set up for Paige is not primarily between the Christian West and Soviet atheism. It's between her identity as part of a socially engaged faith community and her parents' identity as isolated operatives.