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“No Nation Can Win a Struggle Without Faith” ... Religion, the Struggle, and the Future of Our Democracy

By Allan A. Boesak

Religion and Struggle

My exploration of the quote from Steve Biko¹ that serves as the title of this talk is based on a four-fold premise: One, that the struggle for true political and economic freedom in South Africa is far from over; two, that that struggle is inextricably linked to all such struggles for freedom and genuine democracy across the world; three, that in those struggles people's faith has been and still is central; and four, that the very concept “religious values” should be seriously interrogated.

I believe that religion is meant to play a decisive role in helping to shape societies in their struggles for an open, inclusive, responsive, responsible democracy, where justice for the people is central to all decision making, and the dignity of the people comes before expediency in politics. But following Karl Barth's lead, I too make the distinction between religion and faith. Religion as privatized, individualized, culturalized conformity is mere religiosity. It is, Barth said, “the enemy of faith.” The distinction is vital.

Where religiosity is satisfied with form, faith is concerned with substance. Where religion seeks a place of comfort within the world and its rules, structures, and systems, faith seeks to disrupt those systems and structures, challenging those rules and exposing them as rules which favour only the rich and powerful.

When war is at its most profitable, and religion is at its most complacent because it is complicit, faith is most combative in its work for peace. When religion betrays the poor and is craven before the powerful, faith stands with the poor and seeks to empower the powerless. When religion worships at the altar of greed and avarice, faith reminds us that we cannot serve God and Mammon. When religion dons the robes of cowardice and covers up the lie, faith clothes itself in righteousness and stands for the truth. When religion embraces political pietism, calculated forgetfulness and hardheartedness and calls it reconciliation, faith calls for repentance that translates into justice, restitution, and the restoration of dignity.

When religion beats the drums of hatred, revilement, and extremism, faith sings the songs of justice, love, and freedom. When religion preaches exclusivist dogma, faith rejoices in the inclusive love of God.

When religion justifies hypocrisy and bigotry in the name of God, faith, with the prophet Isaiah, exposes the truth: “This people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” Faith stands with Jesus as he says, “And as I am lifted up, I will draw *all* unto me.” No exceptions, no excuses; no ifs, no buts, no howevers.

This is what Biko had in mind when he said that this is the faith we cannot do without, that we need in our struggles for justice and genuine democracy. It is this faith, he would say elsewhere, that is “the righteousness of our strength.” This is the faith through which we will win. Biko knew only too well that the religion

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brought by colonialism, that religion that justified land theft, oppression, slavery, and genocide, was not the faith we needed. It was not a religion that served the God of liberation, justice and dignity. It was rather, one that offered “an appalling irrelevance in the interpretation to the Scriptures”, “the ideal religion for the colonisation of our people.” And he warned black preachers that “nowadays” it was *our* interpretation of the Bible that still makes Christianity the ideal religion for the subjugation of the people. He was searching for the religion of Jesus, the One Biko called “the selfless revolutionary” because of Jesus' love for God, God's people, and God's justice.

Steve Biko was speaking to black church leaders in 1972 at a time of great repression after the Sharpeville massacre², and great fear among the oppressed com-

munities. One consequence of this was that the prophetic church, so challengingly present during the Defiance Campaign, seemed to have lost its voice. Biko accused the black church of not just complacency, but of “conniving” with an oppressive ideology and an interpretation of the Scriptures that has maintained Christianity as a depressingly efficient instrument for the subjugation of the people. We did not just accept, we “connived” at “an appalling irrelevance of the Scriptures” which is no more than a colonialist-trained version of Christianity that had nothing liberating, comforting or humanizing to say in a country “teeming with injustice and fanatically committed to the practice of oppression, intolerance and blatant cruelty because of racial bigotry ... where all black people are made to feel the unwanted step-children of a God whose presence they cannot feel ...”

What Biko said about black people, the oppressive interpretation of the Bible by the church and Christianity as a power of subjugation, is today equally true of Christianity and women, LGBTQI persons, and the poor and the vulnerable in general. Note that “nowadays” Biko uses. Modern-day Western, Christian, imperialist fundamentalism, with its vicious exclusivism, predatory capitalist consumerism, sacralized bigotry, baptized homophobia and sanctified patriarchalism, is trumpeted to people of the Global South - on 43 television channels in South Africa alone - not just by whites, but by Africans and African Americans as the favoured faces of imperial religion in the Global South. And so-called “main-line” religion, in our impotent floundering to compete and catch up, has mainly caved in.

Increasingly, the church across Africa is characterised by the unholy emulation of that peculiar Christianized militarism of American “patriot pastors,” a so-called “spiritual warfare” wholly based on an unabashed, imperialist, violent jihadism across the globe, in tandem with a spiritually militarised bigotry aimed against women, the poor, the LGBTQI community, and everyone not a “born-again, Bible-believing” Christian. And, in the end, as the “prosperity gospel” fires up the imagination of the “set men of God” while capturing the purses of the poor and needy, it is all about power and greed. We are not forced, coerced, or blackmailed into this: we are “conniving” as Biko rightly says. We have made the Bible what Biko called a “poisoned well,” and in the process we are poisoning our democracy. For women, LGBTQI persons, and the poor, we have made faith impotent in the face of these onslaughts upon their dignity, rights and lives, even while we have made society an unsafe place for them, and our churches a refuge for predatory capitalists,

patriarchalists and homophobes. This kind of religion does not enhance democracy.

In his address, Biko was speaking of the Christian faith, but it is obviously true of people of other faiths, as they experience their faith as an inspiration for struggles for justice and freedom. Listen to Ayatollah Khomeini: “Islam is the religion of militant people who are committed to faith and justice. It is the religion of those who desire freedom and independence. It is the school of those who struggle against imperialism.”

Historically there is no question about the role religion – meaning the role played by people inspired by their religion - in the South African struggle for freedom. As far as Christianity is concerned, most of the leaders of the indigenous resistance, such as David Stuurman, David Kruiper and Hendrik Boezak, were committed Christians. And as John De Gruchy makes plain, so were the leaders of the African National Congress (ANC) formed in 1912: Dr John Dube, Rev. Zacharias Mahabane, Dr Pixley Iseke ka-Seme, Rev.

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James Calata, Prof Z.K. Matthews, and Chief Albert Luthuli to name just the most well-known. In 1916, with the devastating effects of the 1913 Land Act just becoming clear, at the beginning of the most grandiose acts of legalised land theft in modern history, Pixley wrote, “The only thing that stands between us and despair is the fact that Heaven has not yet deserted us.” These words from an ANC leader were not considered strange; they were, in fact, fairly typical.

Luthuli was one of the most outspoken and eloquent: It became clear to me that the Christian faith was

not a private affair without relevance to society. It was, rather, a belief which equipped us in a unique way to meet the challenges of our society. It was a belief which had to be applied to the conditions of our lives; and our many works – they ranged from Sunday School teaching to road building – became meaningful as outflow of Christian belief.

And once more:

For myself, I am in Congress precisely because I am a Christian. My Christian belief about human society must find expression here and now, and Congress is the spearhead of the real struggle. Some would have the Communists excluded, others would have all non-Communists withdraw from Congress. My own urge, because *I am a Christian*, is to enter into the thick of the struggle, with other Christians, taking my Christianity with me and praying that it may be used to influence for good the character of the resistance.

And yet again,

It is my hope that what began, in the way of Christian involvement and thinking out, at the time of the Defiance Campaign, will not simply drain away, leaving Christians in despondency and impotence, adapting themselves fearfully to each new outrage, threat, and assault upon the people in our care. There is a witness to be borne, and God will not fail those who bear it fearlessly.

It is this faith tradition Biko was following in his critique of religion and its role in society and the role of the black church in particular within that context.

But clearly this is not the ANC of post-1994 Nelson Mandela who, when Archbishop Ndungane spoke truth to power on the infamous, wasteful, unnecessary and nefarious arms deal, angrily told the churches not to challenge the government, to stick to preaching the Gospel (the RDP of the Soul,³ he called it) and leave politics to politicians. That sounded exactly like P.W. Botha, Louis La Grange, and Alwyn Schlebush admonishing us in the 1980's.

Nor is it the ANC of then-president Thabo Mbeki, who, speaking to the South African Council of Churches in 2001, warned the churches to be merely a voluntary organisation serving the national agenda, but letting the ANC, the true “vanguard of the revolution,” set that national agenda. Of the church, or religion as a “restless presence” in society as Charles Villa-Vicencio called it, as prophetic critique of politics, there should be no sign. And neither is it the ANC of Honorary Pastor Jacob Zuma who now cannot wait for Jesus to come back and end the rule of Cyril Ramaphosa.⁴

What Kind of Religion?

In his book *The Great War on Terror*, International Law scholar Richard Falk is hopeful of the positive role of religion in society today. Despite the distressing signs of religion “wrecking world order” as Falk titled this chapter in his book, he concludes that in the realm of global politics, and in the face of an American “counterapocalyptic reading of September 11 ... taking the unprecedented form of a nonterritorial, counterterrorist crusade” that wields its interventionary authority throughout the world through the exercise of “monopoly control over the militarization of space and oceans, only the great world religions have the credibility, legitimacy, and depth of understanding to identify and reject the idolatry that seems to lie at the core of this American project of planetary domination.”

One hopes that this might be true, but we must not ignore the issues raised by those who believe religion as such is so fundamentally corrupt, so fundamentally irredeemable, that it has nothing to say, nothing to con-

I love the religion of our blessed Savior ... which comes from above, in the wisdom of God which is first pure, then peaceable, gentle ... without partiality and without hypocrisy ... which makes it the duty of its disciples to visit the fatherless and the widow in their affliction.

tribute because of our history of violence, divisionism, hypocrisy, and cruelty. The so-called New Atheists have found an eloquent spokesperson in Richard Dawkins. Listen to what he says,

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

Dawkins uses this picture of the “God of the Old Testament” to write off religion as a whole. Such a god is indeed a menace to democracy. We know of course that Dawkins’ picture of God is much too simplistic. The issue is much more complex. Still, he has a point.

So for us it is crucial to be honest and begin with the question: what kind of religion are we talking about? And we must, with Biko in mind, begin with that unforgettable 19th century African American freedom fighter and abolitionist Frederick Douglass' persistent and fine distinction between "the two religions" and by the same token the two different readings of the Bible:

I love the religion of our blessed Savior ... which comes from above, in the wisdom of God which is first pure, then peaceable, gentle ... without partiality and without hypocrisy ... which makes it the duty of its disciples to visit the fatherless and the widow in their affliction. I love that religion ... It is because I love this religion that I hate the slave-holding, the woman-whipping, the mind-darkening, the soul-destroying religion that exists in America ... loving the one I must hate the other; holding to one I must reject the other.

Douglass was not finished:

I assert most unhesitatingly, that the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes – a justifier of the most appalling barbarity – a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds, - and a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection.

Yet we must not confuse Douglass with Dawkins:

What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the *slave-holding religion* of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference ... I can see no reason, but for the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity.

That is a crucial distinction, as valid today, as we try to discern the workings of empire in its claims upon the Christian faith and its relentless clamour for a religion that is the handmaiden of empire, the echo chamber of its bombastic religious verbosity, the justifier of its hubristic bellicosity.

Equally, Biko made a clear distinction between the Christianity he rejected and the Christianity Black people were yearning for, which for him, as for his generation, was Black liberation theology. For Biko, that could not be the religion of the coloniser, the oppressor, the instigator of dehumanisation and genocide. For him, it was the religion of Jesus, whom he, in a wonderful phrase, called the "selfless revolutionary." That was what instilled in him the belief that religion not only *could*, but was *meant* to play a transformational,

revolutionary, healing role in society. That religion that made him believe in the liberation of the oppressed *and* the oppressor; that kept him sane, and truthful, and faithful, even into those last, indescribably horrific moments.

The Politics of Vulgaritw

Slovenian sociologist and philosopher Slavoj Žižek speaks of what he calls "the politics of vulgarity" rampant on the world stage today.

Žižek means, of course, especially Donald Trump and his vulgar language, the way Trump brags about his sexual assaults on women, his racist talk about Mexicans, Africans and other people of colour. His denigration of vulnerable groups, his homophobia and misogyny, and his justification and encouragement of violent, white supremacists. Tinyiko Moluleke has added to the list Trump's despicable characterisation of Global South countries as "s-hole countries".

The fact that the US president is backing the worst dictatorships in the world today and is seeking to cre-

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ate some more is not new. He is simply honouring an imperialistic American exceptionalist tradition, the country that has, since the second world war, engineered 72 regime changes and coup d'Etats around the world. In this, Donald Trump is simply being true to a tradition followed mercilessly and relentlessly by US presidents including the two Bushes, Bill Clinton and Barack Obama. But more than any occupant of the White House Mr. Trump has used that power to set himself up as a "role model" for other leaders in the world, spurring on and blessing the legitimization of narrow, violent, ethnic nationalisms: from Rodrigo Duterte's autocratic gangsterist regime in the Philippines and Saudi Arabia's Mohammed Ben Salman's youthful but lethal war-mongering and bloodlust, and Bolsonaro's corrupt dictatorship in Brazil, to Hungary's exclusivist, violent Christian nationalism under Viktor Orban to India's Narendra

Modi's equally exclusivist, equally violent Hindu nationalism, to Britain's perfidious Trump clone Boris Johnson. As if to confirm this, Mr Trump congratulated Mr Johnson on becoming Britain's Prime Minister, and according to news reports on July 24, praised Johnson while praising himself: "They like him over there because he is Britain's Trump."

But this situation raises serious, compelling and inescapable questions for people of faith and for those who believe religion should have a positive role in society. Reflecting on this I thought of the that great African American intellectual and Pan-Africanist, W.E.B. DuBois, who six years before his death posed some crucially important questions to his people. "How shall integrity face oppression?" he asked. "What shall honesty do in the face of deception? Decency in the face of insult, self-defense before blows? How shall [courage] and accomplishment meet despising, detraction, and lies? What shall virtue do to meet brute force?"

These are questions, we are discovering, that were not only pertinent to the situation in the United States, from where DuBois was writing and where Dr Martin Luther King Jr. and the black masses of America answered them so magnificently in the Civil Rights struggle. And that was a struggle, you will recall, that has been driven principally by people of faith, especially the Black church with its prophetic tradition, from slave preachers and insurrectionists David Walker and Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner and Sojourner Truth, to Henry McNeal Turner, Martin Luther King Jr., and Ella Baker, to name just a few.

DuBois' voice has been, and is still calling to us, everywhere, in every generation. And they were answered by those in this country who took their faith seriously, who believed, like Ayatollah Khomeini and Albert Luthuli, that religion should be a force against injustice and imperialism. I name just a few. Rev James Calata and Sol Plaatje and Albert Luthuli. Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph and the incredible women of the 1956 march; the mothers of the nation Sophie de Bruijn, Winnie Mandela, Albertina Sisulu and Adelaide Tambo; by Biko and the brave young people of the Soweto Uprisings and by the indomitable masses responding to the call of the United Democratic Front, a courageous non-violent, non-racial battering ram against the gates of apartheid.

DuBois' questions were answered by the prophetic church in South Africa who heard the call and did not cower, who courageously and self-sacrificially, gave leadership in the struggle. I am thinking especially of the thousands upon thousands who from 1976 onwards took their worship of God and their love of justice

from the sanctuaries of the nation to the streets of the nation in righteous protest against apartheid until that evil system was vanquished.

They were, for us, through their life, their testimony, and their sacrifices the living embodiment of the sobering, chilling, but glorious list of the writer of Hebrews:

They suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.

Others were stoned to death, they were sown in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented –

They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

... The world was not worthy of them.

They all believed, they all acted upon that belief, they paid the price, but they persevered, and they were victorious. And the incredible thing is, we were living witnesses.

These are the questions that will continue to haunt

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us. They are crucial for a genuine, open, inclusive, responsive and responsible democracy.

So hear them once more: "How shall integrity face oppression? What shall honesty do in the face of deception? Decency in the face of insult, self-defense before blows? How shall [courage] and accomplishment meet despising, detraction, and lies? What shall virtue do to meet brute force?"

These are questions people of faith, in fact all South Africans, must learn to ask, and respond to as faithfully as we can in a world besieged by the politics of vulgarity.

Enemies of the Faith

But I am thinking of the politics of vulgarity way beyond Donald Trump's predatory misogyny and lethal racism. Let me elaborate.

New billionaires were created every two days between 2017 and 2018, the 2019 Oxfam Report tells us, while every day 1000 people die because of lack of access to basic, affordable health care, and as we speak African children are once again dying of measles, a disease we had overcome decades ago. That is the politics of vulgarity.

In 2019, South Africa remains the most unequal society on earth. Over half our population live in utmost poverty. In the meantime, though, we have over 13,000 dollar millionaires. According to a new study released in June 2019 by AfrAsia Bank, Durban, Belito and Umhlanga in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, with 25%, have seen the biggest growth in wealth among these billionaires over the past decade. Meanwhile, some of the richest ones, over - 3,000 - live in the Stellenbosch, Paarl, Franschhoek triangle. Right here, in other words, in the midst of the most dire poverty. Time Magazine, reporting on our rich/poor gap, writes, "Poverty is so extreme in South Africa that even a lower middle class area looks rich." People of faith should be outraged, but we aren't. The late, and greatly lamented Stellenbosch economist, Sampie Terreblanche, constantly raised these crucial matters, pointing out the undeserved enrichment of whites and the undeserved impoverishment of black South Africans over more than three centuries; warning us that our present grotesque social and economic inequalities are the greatest danger facing our country. It is, he insisted, not only a socio-economic and political question; it is a *moral* question, prompting him to ask, "Why don't the churches rise up in revolutionary anger at these conditions?" He actually talked about a moral question for *white people*, and that remains true. But we now know that the class struggle we are facing is a struggle against a predatory capitalism that has put on a black face. Why not, indeed.

As we speak, at the US' southern border, parents and children are separated and almost half of those have not yet found each other. Babies, toddlers and young children are left to die in those concentration camps the Trump administration calls "border facilities." Those children lucky enough to survive, are still there, sleeping on concrete floors, not allowed a shower since they have come across the border; no soap, no clean clothes, miserable food. This treatment, a report says, is brutal by design. Those wanting to help them are turned away by border guards. A young teacher from Arizona, Scott Warren, has been arrested, charged, and brought to trial where he faces twenty years in prison. His crime? He gave food and water to immigrants wandering through the desert, hoping to reach the US. You heard me right: in the US right now, saving lives is a crime.

A father and his young daughter died trying to cross the Rio Grande, fleeing from the violence, poverty and desperation in El Salvador. President Trump merely shrugs, declaring that "people who try to enter the US illegally, drown in rivers." This despite the fact that people who flee from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, flee from conditions of oppression, violence and impoverishment, created by dictators in turn created and put in place by the US in murderous coup d'Etats and regime changes since the 1980s and who are still doing the US' bidding. Mr. Trump's ignorance or forgetfulness of this history, whether in El Salvador or Honduras or Chile is almost as criminal as his treatment of the refugees fleeing from these countries.

But, and this is the point, Mr Trump is in power because 81% of white Evangelicals in the US voted for him in 2016. He is what white, Christian, Evangelical America wants. Which religious values are Christians upholding here?

Last month, Franklin Graham, son of the late evangelist Billy Graham and today one of the front

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leaders and foremost spokesperson for the American white evangelical right, called for a Day of Prayer for President Trump. Graham gave his reasons: the president was under severe attack from enemies of the president and the US, who, by the same token, are also enemies of the faith.

It might be useful to ask who these enemies of Trump and the faithful in the US are. They are the people who are against the endless wars the US is waging in no less than eight Muslim countries at the moment; people against his embrace of the murderous regime in Saudi Arabia (also a fundamentalist religious regime) who last year beheaded 47 of its citizens because they oppose the house of Saud. These are the people against his immigration policies, against the concentration camps along the US southern border. The enemies of the faith are those against the murderous sanctions imposed upon Venezuela that have taken the lives of more than 40,000 people since 2017. It is those

people who stand in the breach for LGBTQI persons against whom the Trump administration has waged a virtual war at every level; those against the propping up of the murderous apartheid regime in Israel and the illegal and deadly occupation of Palestine. I am not even speaking of the Russians, the Chinese, the Latin Americans, all those “rapists”, “criminals” and “drug dealers” who “invade” the US, and the millions of “bad Muslims” as ... calls them. So finally Christians can rid themselves of that pesky, silly command of Jesus to love our enemies: there are simply too many of them. Who can keep up?

While the resilience of religion has proved Harvey Cox wrong and is playing a larger, more determining role in public life than our post-modern age has ever seen, the politics of solidarity, decency, and integrity has been swallowed whole by the politics of abusive power, craven cowardice, untamed voraciousness, unrepentant racism, shameless bigotry, and unending violence.

Politics and the Prophetic Word

The politics of vulgarity is not new. And it constantly surprises me how keen the Bible’s understanding of the workings of the world is, and how clear the guidelines for prophetic engagement with political powers are. Hear the prophet Jeremiah against king Jehoiakim’s vulgar politics:

“Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbours work for nothing, and does not give them their [rightful] wages ... Are you a king, because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was *well* with him, [because] he judged the cause of the poor and needy; *then* it was well. *Is this not to know me? says the Lord.* But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain...” (Ch. 22)

Nor was it unknown in Amos’ day, or in that of Micah. With prophetic courage and clarity, verse after verse, Micah, in chapter 2, denounces the politics of vulgarity, and then adds with amazing, and sober, insight into the workings of power, ancient and modern, “*because it is in their power.*” (2:1) This is what lies at the core of their evildoing: raw, abusive power. The prophet sees it, and is not afraid to say it. Micah writes as if he has just seen a session of the Zondo Commission.⁵

One should read these words as the conclusion of every accusation the prophet makes: “They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them; they desire the inheritance of the lowly, and take it – *because it is in their power.*” This is profound, systemic, and sustained critique not just of personal

wrongdoing, but of unjust, unequal, and exploitative economic systems.

Then Micah turns to that ever willing handmaiden of abusive power: the religious legitimization of civil religiosity, to the prophets who preach only what the people want to hear. Micah accuses them of crying “Peace” because they themselves, in contrast to the poor, live well off the profits of their faithless complicity while the rich declare “war against those who put nothing in their mouths.” (3:5) It is, Micah sees correctly, a *class war* that is being waged against the poor.

For the followers of Jesus of Nazareth his own example is unequivocal. In his life, his teachings, and his every-day acts, he proved himself to be an implacable enemy of Roman rule, Roman imperial injustice, oppression, and exploitation. He was, as New Testament scholars Richard Horsley and our own Andries van Aarde among others convincingly argued, a social and political revolutionary. African American N.T. scholar Obery M. Hendricks sums it up very well indeed:

“To say that Jesus was a political revolutionary

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is to say that the message he proclaimed not only called for change in individual hearts but also demanded sweeping and comprehensive change in political, social, and economic structures in his setting in life: colonized Israel. It means that if Jesus had his way, the Roman Empire and the ruling elites among his own people either would no longer have held their positions of power, or if they did, would have had to conduct themselves very, very differently. It means that his ministry was to radically change the distribution of authority, power, goods and resources, so all people – particularly the little people, or “the least of these”, as Jesus called them – might

have lives free of political oppression, enforced hunger and poverty, and undue insecurity.”

Those of you who know me will know that I can hardly speak on a subject like this without reminding us of John Calvin and the Reformed tradition. People from the Reformed tradition have no excuse. We know how at the heart of the Reformed tradition lie the gospel’s demands for justice, equity, inclusion and dignity. Perhaps American philosopher/theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff said it best when he reminded us that understanding John Calvin’s “exceptionally bold” theology of social justice was to understand the woundedness of God: that Calvin teaches us that God deems Godself violated in the wounds inflicted upon human beings created in God’s image.

To inflict injury on a fellow human being is to wound God; it is to cause God to suffer. Behind and beneath the social misery of our world is the suffering of God. To pursue justice is to relieve God’s suffering.

“The call to justice is the call to avoid wounding God; the call to eliminate injustice is the call to alleviate divine suffering. If we believed that, and believed it firmly, we would be far more reluctant than we are to participate in the acts and the structures of injustice. If we believed that and believed it firmly, we would ceaselessly struggle for justice and against injustice, bearing with thankful, joyful patience the suffering which that struggle will bring upon us.”

These are the values faith should hold up in the struggle for genuine, inclusive, responsive, humane democracy and an unbundled world.

We began with Biko. Let us end with him: We will not end our struggle, Biko said, until we have grasped that “glittering prize” still “far on the horizon ... the greatest gift we can bestow ... to give South Africa a human face.” That prize is still just hanging on that far, distant horizon. South Africa does not yet have that human face. We hide behind masks. Behind the arrogant mask of self-satisfied power, behind the smug smiles of greed and instant gratification; behind the

self-congratulatory mask of our fake rainbow-nationism, we hide the grim realities of unrepentant racism, crippling poverty, suffering, and abuse, which is the face of the poor, the vulnerable, and the forgotten. Biko’s vision remains unfulfilled, and we must work to bring it to life.

We are not seeking to build a perfect society, but we refuse to be satisfied with injustice, intolerance, discrimination, exclusion, exploitation, and violence. And like Albert Luthuli, we will go into that struggle, taking our Christian faith with us, in the hope that it might influence for good the character of our nation. ■

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We are not seeking to build a perfect society, but we refuse to be satisfied with injustice, intolerance, discrimination, exclusion, exploitation, and violence.

Resistance published in 2015. His most recent book, *Children of the Waters of Meribah: Black Liberation Theology, the Miriamic Tradition, and the Challenges of Twenty-First-Century Empire* published in 2019. This address was delivered at the Stellenbosch Winter School in South Africa on July 18, 2019 and has been revised by the author and published here with his permission. ■

“In the Shadow of a Steeple: Time for a Post-National church?”

by Ken Sehested

Texts: Matthew 5:1-12, Micah 6:1-8, Psalm 15, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

When I was in high school, I was driving and turned down one of the major thoroughfares in the town where we lived and instantaneously, momentarily, felt like I’d entered the Twilight Zone. I had driven down this street hundreds of times, but suddenly I felt like I was lost. The really confusing part was that all the signs and shops were familiar, but somehow disordered. It was familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

It took me about 10 seconds to realize the reason I felt so confused was because the street I was on had been a one-way street and, for the first time, I was traveling it in reverse. It had become so familiar, with the pattern of store and shop signs following one after the other in a particular direction. Now the order of those signs was reversed, familiar but unfamiliar at the same time.

Disorienting: Blessed are those who mourn?
Confusing: The meek will inherit the earth?
Confounding: Blessed are you when people revile and persecute you?
Perplexing: God is choosing what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are?
Unsettling: Is the Gospel foolishness?

Psalm 15 has language that is echoed in the Beatitudes from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Interestingly though, the text gets a lot more specific at points, including the culminating admonition: “Do not lend money at interest” (v. 5). Can you imagine the response if Jerome Powell, the Chair of the Federal Reserve, were to announce such a fiscal policy?

Odd biblical logic returns with the Apostle Paul as he talks about the “foolishness” of the cross, about God’s habit of choosing what is “foolish in the world to shame the wise” and “what is weak in the work to shame the strong” (1 Cor. 1:18-31).

Both the Beatitudes and Paul’s teaching call to mind the “upside down” character of the coming Reign of God—one which is less difficult to accommodate if we stick to our instructions: “God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but

to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). That statement inspired our congregational motto of “seeking justice, pursuing peace, following Jesus.”

To arrive at this beatific vision involves a new orientation that begins with a process of disorientation. Getting confused is the first step in getting saved—a salvation not disembodied and beyond history, but a liberation which breaks out in the midst of fleshly life.

As citizens of the United States, we are schooled from birth to join the chant: We’re #1! We’re #1! And the “we’re #1” symbol—index finger pointed to the sky—is simultaneously a theological presumption that God, the real and true Number One, is on our side and is our sponsor.

Echoes of this have never been louder than with the current administration and devoted followers of the president. We do well to remember that the notion of being “the one indispensable nation” is a phrase used by Presidents Clinton and Obama, but even before that, by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in reference to enforcing an embargo on Iraq in the aftermath of the first Gulf War in 1991: “If we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see further into the future.”¹

We are indeed #1 in gross domestic product and in military spending. But among the world’s top 20 wealthiest nations, the US is also #1 in poverty rate, in rates of incarceration, in the greatest inequality of incomes, in the highest social immobility, in the highest infant mortality and in obesity rates, in the highest percentage of the population that lack health insurance, in the highest number of guns at home and weapons sales abroad.

This “indispensable nation” is also now free to go rogue in military action whenever and wherever it wants. We live in the dark shadow of President Bush’s 2002 National Security Strategy Doctrine which declared for the first time in our nation’s history that the U.S. reserves the right to preemptive war. The President of the United States is authorized to take hostile action against any party simply by chanting the mantra “war

on terror.”

We are, in short, on the precipice of a permanent state of war², for there are no measurable criteria for when a war on “terror” can be considered complete.³

While this condition of unimpeachable authority was only recently codified into law, it has been with us from the beginning. After attacking a Pequot Indian village on the Mystic River, killing approximately 400 Pequot men, women and children, William Bradford, Plymouth Colony Governor (1621–1657), wrote in his journal:

“It was a fearful sight to see them thus frying in the fire and the streams of blood quenching the same, and horrible was the stink and scent thereof; but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice, and they gave the praise thereof to God.”

This from those pilgrims who claimed to be God’s new Israel, a “city set upon high as a light to the nations.” This from others who would later announce our country’s manifest destiny.

Among the most naked statements of raw imperial motive comes from an historic policy planning study written in 1948 by George Kennan, then with the U.S. State Department and later ambassador to the Soviet Union. Kennan, a Democrat and later critic of President Bush’s war in Iraq, wrote the following:

“We have about 50% of the world’s wealth but only 6.3% of its population. . . . In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security. To do so we will have to dispense with all sentimentality and day-dreaming. . . .

“We should dispense with the aspiration to ‘be liked’ or to be regarded as the repository of a high-minded international altruism. We should stop putting ourselves in the position of being our brother’s keeper and refrain from offering moral and ideological advice. We should cease to talk about vague and unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of living standards, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are then hampered by idealistic slogans, the better.”

Seventy years later, the present administration has fully embraced “straight power concepts” with only jingoistic slogans to shore them up. With involvement in seven ongoing wars,⁴ Dr. King was prescient when he said that the U.S. was “the greatest purveyor of violence

in the world today.” That quote, incidentally, isn’t on the monument to Dr. King in our nation’s capital.

Add to that sad observation that the majority of U.S. veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan do not believe those wars were worth the price paid, a sentiment held by the American people as well.⁵ While our Christian mandate to love one another may be clear enough, the murkiness of these “forever wars” are mired in a fundamental misstep, according to Donald Stoker, professor of strategy and policy at the U.S. Naval War College: “The confusion and public anger that’s come to characterize America’s wars of late is the natural byproduct of a lack of clear objectives from those who wage them in the first place.”⁶ Stoker asserts that “basic, core questions like ‘what do we really want’ and ‘how are we going to preserve the peace once we get it’ are overlooked.”⁷

The title “In the Shadow of a Steeple,” comes from the so-called “lost” verse to Woody Guthrie’s song, “This Land Is Your Land”—“lost” because it disappeared from the singing of this song:

*In the squares of the city, in the shadow of a
steeple
By the relief office, I’ve seen my people
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking:
Is this land made for you and me?*

That visual image of the poor standing in soup lines under the shadow of church steeples, steeples built early on in our nation’s life in the center of city squares—that is to say, at the center of political and economic power, providing ecclesial authorization for the hoarding of resources and the division between the “makers” and the “takers”—is an image that disturbs me greatly.

Contemporary use of “freedom” language also disturbs me greatly—freedom language being so essential to the biblical story. Nowadays, freedom has come to mean something altogether different. Economically, freedom means the capacity of corporate capitalism to penetrate and control the economies of other nations. Politically, freedom is defined by Citizens United, opening the floodgates of corporate-funded electoral politics. Militarily, freedom reflects the strategy of preemptive war.

And in the Church, “freedom” has come to mean “don’t ask me to make commitments,” don’t talk much about money, and don’t say much about risk. It reminds me of the scene in C.S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Young Susan asks Mr. Beaver whether Aslan is a safe lion. “‘Course he isn’t safe,” replies Mr. Beaver. “But he’s good.” The God with whose purposes we align is not safe. God will not always keep us out of harm’s way—in fact, that’s exactly where the Spirit

could end up leading us. But our story says, yes, God is good.

Hiding behind the claim to be “exceptional” is becoming increasingly popular among political leaders in our nation’s life. And the implication of the Church in such affairs is unmistakable, even for churches that don’t display both the Christian and U.S. flags in their sanctuaries. The “shadow of the steeple” falls again every time one of our elected leaders end their comments by demanding “God bless America.”⁸ I find it deeply alarming to hear the escalating calls for “Christian nationalism,” and believe it to be a stench in God’s nostrils.

Is it time to declare ourselves to be a “post-national” church? What might it look like to be irrevocably in love with our country and deeply distraught over and alienated from our nation?

I can think of several reasons why we shouldn’t—particularly because of the temptation to arrogance that happens when people of faith try to distinguish themselves from the larger culture; and also because we have the habit of thinking that making statements is enough.

But it’s a conversation worthy of our discernment. In the meantime, the beatific vision continues washing

over us, announcing the coming New Heaven and New Earth. Our common prayer is that it soaks in, that it does its disorienting, confounding work on the way we have been taught to think and act. And that slowly but surely it remakes our life from the ground up.

In the meantime, the meek are getting ready.

In the meantime, Gospel foolishness keeps breaking out in unexpected places.

In the meantime, rock on, you beatitudes. Turn the shadow of that steeple into a resting place for people who know the Beloved Community is on its way. ■

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This is an edited and updated version of a sermon delivered 2 February 2014 at Circle of Mercy Congregation, Asheville, NC. Ken Sehested, founding co-pastor of Circle of Mercy, is now the curator of prayerandpolitics.org, an online journal at the intersection of spiritual formation and prophetic action.

“As I have read the Gospels over the years, the belief has grown in me that Christ did not come to found an organized religion but came instead to found an unorganized one. He seems to have come to carry religion out of the temples into the fields and sheep pastures, onto the roadsides and the banks of the rivers, into the houses of sinners and publicans, into the town and the wilderness, toward the membership of all that is here. Well, you can read and see what you think.”

—From “Jayber Crow” by Wendell Berry

Why Brexit Matters...

...Because an economic/political union that has protected Europe for 75 years from centuries of terrible bloodshed is coming apart.

By Ronald J. Sider

For centuries, European nations fought bloody wars massacring each other by the hundreds of thousands, then millions and eventually tens of millions. When the U.S. entered World War I in 1917, 46 million Protestants and 62 million Catholics on one side were trying to kill 45 million Protestants and 63 million Catholics on the other side. Millions died. Two decades later in World War II, at least 20 million died. Rampant nationalism that moved the British to hate and kill the French and then the Germans to hate and kill millions was a major cause of these centuries of bloodshed.

So after World War II, the Europeans with the support of the United States chose to nurture cooperative European structures that would discourage excessive nationalism and prevent war. First, a cooperative economic arrangement and then the European Union (with a common parliament, European Court and common currency (the euro) emerged. Goods and people can move freely from any country to another in the European Union. The result has been 75 years of peace in Europe after centuries of terrible bloodshed.

Now, nationalistic forces are rising up in both Europe and United States. Radical, often anti-democratic nationalistic leaders in Hungary, Poland, Italy and elsewhere attack the European Union. In 2016, the British people voted by a narrow margin to leave the European Union. After the former Prime Minister Theresa May failed after two years of efforts to arrange a satisfactory deal to leave the European Union, a new hyper-nationalistic leader, Boris Johnson, became prime minister of the UK in July of this year. He now claims he will take Britain out of the European Union even if there is no negotiated agreement—even though a majority of the British parliament oppose such a move and the result would be economically devastating for Great Britain and harmful for all of Europe.

Foolishly, Donald Trump has praised the British nationalists who want to leave the European Union and now encourages Boris Johnson. It may be that Trump thinks he can negotiate more favorable trade deals for the U.S. with individual European nations if the European Union breaks apart. But such a strategy, grounded in a hyper-nationalistic “America first,” approach is profoundly unwise. It ignores the success of ever-closer common European structures that have produced 75 years of peace after centuries of war. Only an American president with no understanding of history would promote such a stupid, immoral and eventually counter-productive policy. Americans should support global economic and political structures that promote peace, justice, freedom and democracy.

The central institutions of the European Union have undoubtedly made some mistakes. They need to be corrected. There should be room for individual approaches and policies that reflect the unique history of each country. And that can be done.

But to blow up the highly successful European Union is a huge immoral mistake. ■

Editor's Note: Ronald J. (Ron) Sider has had enormous influence on millions of Christians for decades. I became aware of him in the late 1970s when I first read his book, Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity which became one of the most influential books of the 20th century. He is a prolific writer, a Christian voice for justice, and an inspiration. He is recently retired Professor Emeritus of Holistic Ministry and Public Policy and Director of the Sider Center on Ministry and Public Policy at Palmer Theological Seminary and President of Evangelicals for Social Action. His free blog is found at ronsiderblog.substack.com.

Religious Beliefs Don't Give Us Freedom to Discriminate

By David R. Currie

For those who have never heard of Rachel Held Evans, I want to introduce her to you. In May of this year, at age 37, she died from severe swelling of the brain brought on by an allergic reaction to medication she was taking for an infection. She left behind a husband and two children — a boy age three and a girl just under a year old.

She also left behind millions of us who admired her and were inspired by her grace and courage.

I followed her writings on Twitter and simply loved the things she wrote. She was a Christian who struggled honestly with the questions of faith. She wrote four books about her faith, especially encouraging others who struggled with making sense of God, the Bible and living the Christian faith.

She always wrote about God's grace, and was courageous in doing so. She challenged those who gave simplistic answers to life's complex questions. I'll share just a couple of quotes that especially resonated with me:

"It's a frightful thing – thinking you have to get God right in order to get God to love you, thinking you're always one error away from damnation. ... The very condition of humanity is to be wrong about God. The moment we figure God out, God ceases to be God. Maybe it's time to embrace the mystery and let ourselves off the hook."

She also wrote:

"I've come to regard with some suspicion those who claim that the Bible never troubles them. I can only assume this means they haven't actually read it."

I encourage you to buy her books, read her blog, Google her, and learn about her. Your life will be blessed as her writings challenge — and expand — your own understanding of God and God's purposes for you.

Remembering Rachel brings to my mind Charles Perry, the Texas state senator from my area, who recently sponsored Senate Bill 17. I call his proposed law "the permission to hate in the name of Jesus" bill. If this bill were to pass, it would allow people serving the public to refuse service to people whose lives or beliefs conflict with their own "sincerely held religious beliefs." Of course, what Senator Perry aims to

do, in proposing this bill, is to give people the right to discriminate against gay people, or Muslims, or ... well, you get the idea. If you don't like the way someone chooses to live their lives or the way they think, it's okay to disrespect them and refuse to serve them. Personally, I can't imagine Jesus being pleased. Seems to me Jesus didn't treat people this way.

Rachel wrote: "I thought God wanted to use me to show gay people how to be straight. Instead, God used gay people to show me how to be Christian." Same thing has happened to me. I finally figured out what Dr. Tracy tried to teach me at Howard Payne University years ago — that the love of God is uncon-

Rachel wrote: "I thought God wanted to use me to show gay people how to be straight. Instead, God used gay people to show me how to be Christian."

ditional and that my role as a follower of Christ is to love people, not judge them.

Maybe you disagree with Rachel and me. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gives you the right to believe as you see fit, but it does not give you the right to discriminate against those who disagree with you. You need to learn the difference between acceptance and approval. You don't have to approve of the way that others use their freedom in living out their faith and their lives, but you do have to accept their right to do so. It's the American way.

My great-grandfather, Robert Morrison Currie, came to Texas from Mississippi in 1857 and founded the First Baptist Church of La Feria, Texas. Knowing the time and culture into which he was born, I can imagine he might have had the "sincerely held religious belief" that a white man could own a black man and I can imagine that he quoted Ephesians 6:5 to support his religious belief: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with the sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ."

During the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, there were plenty of people who did not want to serve African-Americans in their restaurants, hotels, or other places of business because of their “sincerely held religious belief” that white people were superior to black people. Sadly, that appears to be the “sincerely held religious belief” of millions in America today who are encouraged by our president and his statements in support of white supremacy and racism.

What most bothers me about Senator Perry’s bill is his statement about how the Bible doesn’t need interpreting ... that it speaks for itself. That just blew my mind, but it is typical of the thinking of Religious Right fundamentalists.

Take, for example, Psalm 137:9 (NIV): “*Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.*” I kind of think that verse (and a few thousand more) might need some interpretation.

Every year we celebrate July 4. It is the time to reflect on the forming of this great nation and the principles of our Founding Fathers. I always stress the First Amendment, because I believe religious liberty is the most important principle in American life. If we would live by the First Amendment, we might actually have some unity and respect in this country.

The greatest words ever inscribed into law by any country are the first 16 words of the First Amendment: “*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.*”

But I am very concerned that many Christian leaders — for example, Franklin Graham, Robert Jeffress, and Jerry Falwell, Jr.—and political leaders — for example, President Trump, Gov. Abbott, Senator Ted Cruz, Lt. Governor Dan Patrick, and State Senator Charles Perry—are working to redefine religious liberty as the right of Christians to be mean and hateful in the name of Jesus.

That is not the meaning of the First Amendment, which guarantees all people in America — not just Christians — the freedom to worship (or not) freely without interference. It does not guarantee them the right to use their “sincerely held religious beliefs” as an excuse for racist and bigoted — or downright evil — actions toward others.

For example, you can’t run a Christian orphanage and beat kids in violation of state law. In other words, your interpretation of scripture may lead you to believe that you have a right to beat kids into obedience. Your belief may be protected by the First Amendment, but your right to carry out that interpretation by actually beating kids is not. The same goes for your interpreta-

tion of scripture on other people’s religious beliefs, race or ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

Friends, you can believe anything you want in America, and the Constitution protects your right to believe it. That protection is for all people of all faiths or of no faith at all. Your right to live out your faith is protected, but the “free exercise thereof” does not mean you can act in ways that are mean, hateful and wrong. People in America have a right to live by their own value system as long as they don’t hurt others. That is freedom.

In 1791, Baptist preacher John Leland defined religious liberty as well as it will ever be defined: “Let every man speak freely without fear — maintain the principles he believes — worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God or 20 Gods; and let the government protect him in so doing.” America was founded on this very sentiment.

Respect the First Amendment, and you will find we can be a unified country once again. It protects us from the Grahams, Jeffresses, and Falwells of the world (and the Curries of the world), as well as any extrem-

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ist believers of any faith. That was the wisdom of our Founding Fathers. Let’s not set that wisdom aside by forcing our religion on others.

Remember Rachel Held Evans, and live your life with grace and courage. ■

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Race, Trauma, and Climate Change

By Elizabeth Allison

Since at least the 1950s, scientists, policymakers, and oil companies have understood the threats of climate change to human society and the future of life on Earth.¹ During this time, oil producers have engaged in obfuscation and disinformation campaigns to downplay the demonstrable hazards of continued fossil fuel production.²

Meanwhile, policymakers have been unable to make significant headway in slowing the pace of climate disruption. Despite overwhelming scientific evidence – despite the fact that low-lying and coastal communities now experience flooding from rising seas, farmers battle intensified droughts and storms, and migrants flee from various countries in part because of worsening environmental conditions – many in the US remain resistant to the scientific consensus.

A History of Denial

Beyond the disastrous effects of deliberate disinformation, the psychological dynamics of trauma offer another way of understanding this stubborn refusal. Though a detour into psychology may appear to lead us away from the climate change debate, I argue that it is only by unpacking the historical foundations of collective trauma – and analyzing the role of denial in American history – that the dominant power structure can begin to understand the refusal to address ecological issues that are right in front of us.

The founding of the US involves at least two cataclysmic collective traumas that have yet to be fully addressed: 1) the genocide of Native Americans; and 2) the kidnapping and enslavement of Africans. These monumental epochs of suffering are pushed into the past in the minds of many, yet they remain unresolved. Building on the calls for reparations by thinkers like Ta-Nehisi Coates³, and the insight into the intersectionality of oppressions of Kimberlé Crenshaw⁴, I suggest that the persistence of unaddressed historical trauma has prevented us from addressing climate change as creatively and forcefully as the crisis demands.

A Psychological Loop

Psychological trauma theory explains how an individual who has experienced trauma continues to

rehearse and repeat the trauma in the absence of psychological reckoning. The unconscious repetition of the trauma feels compelling and unavoidable to the individual caught in it. Like Freud's "return of the repressed," the individual gets caught in a loop of psychological repetition, playing out the trauma over and over again in an effort to find a way out of past harms.

New understandings of the effects of intergenerational trauma show how past wounds continue to influence present wellbeing.¹ Individual trauma on a mass scale may give rise to collective historical trauma that wears on the psyches of both oppressed and oppressor. As a society, Americans are caught in a systemic cycle of colonialist oppression and domination, in which

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African Americans, Native Americans, and people of color more generally are controlled and exploited in different guises, from slavery, genocide, and dispossession, to contemporary mass incarceration and murders. These dominarepetitions keep us all – descendants of victims and perpetrators – mired in the horror and shame of historical traumas, preventing us from moving forward collectively on any number of urgent issues.

Deficits of Empathy

The oppression of Native and Indigenous peoples and Africans has required a tremendous suppression of compassion over the centuries. Indigenous and African peoples were constructed as nonhuman, undeserving

of compassion or concern. In cutting off this feeling of empathy, colonists suppressed their own humanity, and taught themselves and their descendants to ignore and suppress feelings: Emotions were understood to be misleading and unreliable, irrelevant for decision-making. Those who expressed emotion – children and women – were untrustworthy narrators of their own experience, and needed to be taught to adopt rational, emotionless, “objective” thinking.

The environmental historian Carolyn Merchant has traced the rise of Western science in Europe’s early modern era.⁶ During this time, the earth itself, which had been viewed as a nurturing and beneficent being, came to be seen as insentient “dead” matter that could be used for any purpose that humans desired. No longer was mining – invading Earth’s body – forbidden out of fear of injuring her or raising her wrath. Mining was now allowed because soil and minerals were only material with no purpose of their own, available to serve human ends. A new scientific sensibility emerged – disinterested, objective – that regarded the planet in a more detached or disconnected way. From this “death of nature,” it was a short intellectual step to see other humans in an instrumentalist, ultimately disposable manner in order to justify the economic aims of those in power, paving the way for slavery and genocide.

The suppression of empathy for others left a mark of trauma on both the oppressed, whose lives and families and trajectories were obliterated, and also on the oppressor, who had to actively suppress human connection. By denying the damage the instrumentalist worldview imposed on both the oppressed and the oppressors, white Americans⁷ have failed to grapple with a core part of our identity and have remained mired in a cycle of shame and repression. The unspeakable acts of historical trauma give shame immense power.⁸

With history walled off from daily life and consciousness, trauma claims too much unconscious attention and energy. American politics recapitulates the harms of the past in endless cycles of recrimination and denial. Intergenerational trauma gobbles up coping mechanisms, leaving little psychic energy for creative adaptation to new circumstances.

On the environmental front, the ongoing suppression of empathic emotion prevents descendants of oppressors from acknowledging – and truly *feeling* – the damage that our fossil fuel-intensive lifestyle imposes on all life. Adopting the stance of disinterested science and economic rationality hampers the capacity for empathy with others, human and nonhuman, hurt

by climate change. Moving forward requires looking back, reckoning with the suffering inherent in the founding of the US, and investigating ways to bring about justice and reparations. This process will free up emotional and intellectual energy to face the fresh crises of the new century.

Voices of the Churches

The church knows something about brokenness, repentance, and the healing that can come from seeking forgiveness. This is the time for churches to take a leadership role in bringing to light the ongoing injury caused by the colonialist mentality, and helping congregants reckon with their disparate positions in a society that values some lives more than others. A reckoning would begin to repair the fabric of American society.

Such a reckoning, conducted alongside critical technological and policy innovations to reduce carbon emissions, would help work through some of the anger and shame that keeps so many locked away in

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isolated individualism. Recognizing and confronting the legacies of pain and shame would free up energy to address the climate crisis directly and fearlessly and connect ecological devastation to the original deficit of empathy. Greater recognition of the knowledge traditions of Indigenous and African societies could provide new insights about living with respect for the natural world.

The current moment requires the gifts of everyone on the planet. Addressing climate change without worsening social inequities is the largest challenge human-

ity has ever faced. We need to tap into every insight, try every experiment to find ways of living in greater harmony on a thriving planet. Five hundred years of colonialism, and 70 years of hyper-consumptive capitalism, have brought ruin to the planet. Rather than following the dominator pathways of the colonialist mentality that have failed us again and again – a common definition of insanity – more inclusive thinking would reconceive existing power structures and honor suppressed insights about ecological resilience carried in cultures around the world. With action necessary on climate change, and just over a decade to decarbonize the global economy, dominant structures must recognize the urgent necessity of repenting past harms and seeking to make amends through reparations, and then moving forward collectively to co-create a flourishing future.

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founded and chairs the graduate program in Ecology, Spirituality, and Religion. Her research and teaching explore connections between religion, ethics, and environmental practice, with particular attention to biodiversity, waste, ecological place, and climate change. She is a graduate of the joint degree program between Yale Divinity School and the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies. This essay first appeared in Yale’s “Reflections: A Magazine of Theological and Ethical Inquiry” and is published here with permission. ■

Does the United States have more bad people than anywhere else?

Let’s leave aside the fact that no divine entity or precept of natural law gives anyone the right to own an assault weapon. Let’s also ignore the fact that it’s entirely likely that gun control solutions would have denied the Odessa shooter easy access to the firearms with which he carried out his killings.

The most interesting question here is about evil intent. If human evil is the ultimate cause of gun violence—rather than the shocking ease with which modern firearms allow tense situations to escalate into deadly violence and unbalanced individuals to become mass murderers in a matter of seconds—then presumably there must be more bad people in America than anywhere else in the world.

—David Atkins in the *Washington Monthly*

“A Voice Crying in the Wilderness”: Joseph Martin Dawson’s Quest for Social Justice

By Bill Pitts

Editor’s note: This is the second in a three-part telling of the influence of J.M. Dawson in advancing a Christian social ethic among Baptists in the South.

The Church and Racism as combatted by J.M. Dawson (1879-)

Throughout much of his lifetime, Texas pastor J.M. Dawson regularly encountered other races, especially African Americans and Hispanics (Negroes and Mexicans in the parlance of Dawson’s era). In 1953, Dawson briefly addressed the problem of racism in America in a systematic fashion in a chapter in his book, *America’s Way in Church, State and Society*.¹ This book was published the year before the landmark Supreme Court decision which overturned the earlier “separate but equal” court decision, thereby altering the legal landscape for race relations in the United States. Dawson expressed his opinion on race as occasions arose during his ministry. However, his personal experience 37 years earlier of witnessing an act of racial hatred ignited his indignation.

Very early in his Waco ministry, Dawson encountered a horrific instance of racial violence. He reported to James Dunn, “I saw a Negro burned to death by a mob—it was later proven that he was innocent. Five thousand people followed the mob downtown, piled up the wood, and then burned him to death.”² Dawson told Dunn that the incident “had much to do with his subsequent attitudes.”³ The event was the infamous lynching of Jesse Washington in front of city hall in 1916.⁴ Dawson reported that since he was accustomed to exercising pulpit freedom as pastor at First Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, he condemned the violent killing of the Negro from the pulpit, even though he knew that nearly all of the church members were members of the Klan.⁵ In fact, church members had only recently invited Dawson to join the Klan, but he had declined and now had denounced the organization.⁶

He reports that he swore on the altar of God that he would henceforth fight lynching.⁷ The week following the lynching, he wrote a strong resolution condemning the incident, which was adopted by the Waco Pastors’ Association, although not signed by all of the ministers.⁸ John W. Storey wrote, “In 1922, an election year in which the Klan was especially active and in which violence again flared in Waco, Dawson forthrightly rebuked the mobs. His courage elicited praise from James B. Cranfill,

the editor of the *Baptist Standard*.”⁹ Cranfill, who also held the Klan in contempt, said, “Our Baptist preachers are not acting; they are silent when they should speak.” He continued, saying, “The only one I knew of manly enough to address such issues from the pulpit was J.M. Dawson.”¹⁰

Lynching was one of the worst expressions of sustained racism in American history. It was conducted by mob violence and employed to generate fear and to keep Negroes in subjection. Lynching was designed to subvert Emancipation and Civil War Era constitutional amendments protecting Negroes. The height of the lynching era occurred from 1890 to 1920, with 1892 being the worst year. Ida Wells, black activist, spent her life speaking and writing to expose this horrendous practice.¹¹ Dawson does not indicate that he ever had to return to the issue of lynching. He does indicate that support for the Klan waned in the churches.¹²

For 30 years, Dawson served on the Board of Bishop College in Marshall, a Texas school founded by Northern Baptists to train Negro students.¹³ He was a firm believer in the value and importance of education. He wrote “The Great Cause of Christian Education among Negroes in Texas,” indicating the ways Negro churches had advanced Negro life. But he also pointed out that the American churches did not have enough moral influence to prevent the Civil War; they were part of the problem of division. He contended that politicians also played the race card for votes, and public education was full of inequities. At one point, he noted, South Carolina provided \$50 per year to educate a white child, but only \$2.50 for a Negro child.¹⁴

Dawson was a gadfly. At the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, held in Atlanta in 1919, he delivered an exceptionally inflammatory speech holding Southern Baptists responsible for moral neglect. He announced that there were 12 million Negroes in the nation and the majority were in the South and were Baptists. He declared:

They constitute our natural, scriptural, logical, and most practical missionary opportunity. If we are apathetic toward our Christian obligation to these Negroes, we are condemned of mankind and of God. Has not the time come when Southern Baptists should undertake more seriously to assist this patient but potential race to a Christian solution of

*their problem?*¹⁵

Eight years later, Dawson deeply inflamed Baptist passions again by publishing “Baptist Illiteracy in the South”. Here he argued that the major responsibility for illiteracy in the South rests with the Baptists.¹⁶ Dunn wrote that Dawson presented the argument so tellingly that the resulting furor lasted for weeks.¹⁷ John D. Freeman, editor of the Tennessee Baptist newspaper, wrote several articles lamenting Dawson’s charge: “Just why he should ever have done it! He has betrayed the masses of Southern Baptists.”¹⁸ Southern Baptist Convention President E. Y. Mullins responded with criticism, but did not refute the facts.¹⁹ Dawson thought the responses of his critics “completely ignored the Negroes, most of whom were Baptists.” He concluded, “For the education of colored people Southern Baptists appeared to care little.”²⁰ Dawson did not let up. Years later he wrote that Southern Baptists had failed to reform their region and had failed to help fellow black Baptists in their region.

*We now [in 1946] face up to the fact that here in the South, Baptists reaching close to six million may be called somewhat predominant, at least in numbers; and yet, it is authentically charged that here is the poorest housing to be found in the nation, the people are poorest fed, the poorest clothed, incomes are the lowest, illiteracy is the highest, the death rate is the highest, prejudices are the worst, and economic exploitation of the helpless is the most serious.*²¹

At mid-century Dawson noted that the National Council of Churches had established a good record on race and the church.²² Dawson corresponded with the National Council of Churches about Negro presence in Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) churches. Although several SBC churches had made provision to accept Negroes, he calculated that the actual percentage of Negro members in white churches was only about half of one percent (8000 Negroes).²³

By 1950, the SBC began to change institutional policy, admitting Negroes to Baptist colleges and universities—at Wayland Baptist College (now University) and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1951.²⁴ Dawson observed, “The Negroes have advanced, but they have suffered. The church needs to do more.”²⁵ Dawson called for action; citing the parable of the Good Samaritan, Dawson said that Jesus reveals “how defective is a religion that fails to show its love to God by means of service to man.”²⁶ He boldly affirmed that Christians must respect other races.²⁷

As high schools were being integrated, following the example of Little Rock in 1957, the Texas Legislature proposed a bill to close the schools if federal troops were sent to enforce integration. Dawson courageously testified before the Texas Senate Committee, stating that the bill

was based on an un-Christian theme of white supremacy. Despite his age, he was heckled mercilessly, but he nevertheless advanced his purpose: The bill failed.²⁸

Dawson also welcomed ministry to Mexicans. The women of First Baptist Church, Waco, established a mission for Mexicans in 1909; in 1918, the mission became a church. FBC secured a site and constructed a building for the congregation downtown at 4th and Jefferson Streets.²⁹ Dawson thought that working with Mexicans was a practical necessity in Texas. They had established themselves in Texas and the Southwest. Moreover, the clear mandate of scripture for the church is to practice brotherhood.³⁰ Dawson said that to fail to treat Mexicans justly is to lose moral influence abroad.³¹ Failure at this point would undermine foreign missions in Latin America. This was always a concern for mission-minded Baptists, but never a powerful enough incentive to displace systemic American racism. In his final book, Dawson praised the work of Mexican American, *Jose Antonio Navarro: Co-Creator of Texas* (1969).³²

Dawson observed that racial hatred was one of the effects of war. He noted how this practice had occurred with the Mexican/American relations in the Mexican American War, with the Germans in World War I, and with the Japanese in World War II. During World War I, a Baylor professor of German descent, Dean J.L. Kesler, was harassed to the point of resigning despite efforts of some to defend him.³³ During World War II, Japanese were unjustly confined in relocation camps. Only later did the nation admit the injustice of this action. However, the effects of war went far beyond exacerbating racial tensions, and Dawson also turned his attention to reducing the sentiment of militarism in America.

Reflections on ethics leads inevitably to one’s anthropology or understanding of the nature of humans who are called on constantly to make ethical decisions. In a baccalaureate sermon delivered at the University of Texas in 1926, Dawson affirmed that Christianity may be “characterized as a religion of personality.” For him, the starting point for Christian actions was “the assertion of man’s freedom.” Freedom, in turn, “implies the responsibility without which moral order must topple.” Further, he declared, that belief in freedom “implies democracy and the rights of individual men.”³⁴ These convictions regarding the dignity, freedom, and worth of every individual formed the theological foundation for his social outlook. ■

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The Radical Theology that Could Make Religious Freedom a Thing of the Past: Even Devout Christians Should Fear These Influential Leaders' Refusal to Separate Church and State

By David R. Brockman

Though it's seldom mentioned by name, it's one of the major forces in Texas politics today: dominion theology, or dominionism. What began as a fringe evangelical sect in the 1970s has seen its influence mushroom — so much so that sociologist Sara Diamond has called dominionism “the central unifying ideology for the Christian Right.” That's especially true here in Texas, where dominionist beliefs have, over the last decade, become part and parcel of right-wing politics at the highest levels of government.

So, what is it? Dominionism fundamentally opposes America's venerable tradition of church-state separation. In fact, dominionists deny that the founders ever intended that separation in the first place. According to Frederick Clarkson, senior fellow for religious liberty at the non-profit social justice think tank, Political Research Associates, dominionists believe that Christians “have a biblical mandate to control all earthly institutions — including government — until the second coming of Jesus.” And that should worry all Texans — Christians and non-Christians alike.

Dominionism comes in “soft” and “hard” varieties. “Hard” dominionism (sometimes called Christian Reconstructionism), as Clarkson describes it, explicitly seeks to replace secular government, and the U.S. Constitution, with a system based on Old Testament law.

The father of hard dominionism, the late Presbyterian theologian, R.J. Rushdoony, called for his followers to “take back government ... and put it in the hands of Christians.”

Rushdoony's legacy has been carried on by his son-in-law, Tyler-based economist Gary North, an unapologetic theocrat who in 1982 called for Christians to “get busy in constructing a Bible-based social, political, and religious order which finally denies the religious liberty of the enemies of God.” (North, founder of the Institute for Christian Economics, did not respond to my request for comment.)

Perhaps the most powerful dominionist in Texas politics is Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick. Patrick

said that elected officials must look to Scripture when they make policy “because every problem we have in America has a solution in the Bible.”

Mainstream Texas political figures don't go quite that far. Instead they trade in “soft” dominionism. While soft dominionists do not advocate replacing the Constitution with biblical law, they do believe that Christians need to regain the control over political and cultural institutions that they (supposedly) lost after

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the founding period.

Top Texas political figures have had links to dominionism for years. In 2011, the *Observer* covered then-Governor Rick Perry's ties to a branch of the movement, the New Apostolic Reformation. Since then, the relationship between dominionism and right-wing politics has become even cozier.

Case in point: Ted Cruz. Although Cruz is too politically savvy to openly endorse dominionism, key figures on his team are explicit dominionists.

The most important may be his father, evangelist Rafael Cruz, a frequent surrogate for Cruz on the political stage.

Cruz's père espouses Seven Mountains Dominionism, which holds that Christians must take control of seven “mountains,” or areas of life: family, religion, education, media, entertainment, business and government. Speaking at the Texas GOP Convention

in Dallas in May, Rafael Cruz claimed that God inspired the founders to produce the Constitution, and declared that “biblical values” have made America the greatest country on earth. He encouraged Christian pastors to run for public office at every level, and called upon all Christians to exercise their “sacred responsibility” to vote for candidates who uphold biblical values.

As for what Thomas Jefferson famously called America’s “wall of separation between Church and State,” Cruz claimed in a 2016 sermon that it was meant to be a “one-way wall” — preventing government from interfering in religion but allowing the Church to exercise dominion over government. (I have to wonder whether a “one-way wall” is really a wall at all....)

Another Seven Mountains Dominionist active in Cruz’s failed presidential bid was David Barton, who managed one of Cruz’s super PACs. On a 2011 radio program, Barton said that Christians need to “be able to influence and control” the “mountains” in order to “establish God’s kingdom.” An amateur historian, outspoken Christian Americanist, and long-time Texas GOP activist, Barton runs WallBuilders, an Aledo group that seeks to “exert a direct and positive influence in government” and to assist public officials in developing “policies which reflect Biblical values.” (Barton also played a key role in incorporating Christian Americanism into the Texas curriculum standards.)

Perhaps the most powerful dominionist in Texas politics is Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick. In a 2012 sermon and again at the 2015 Texas Tribune Festival, he said that the United States was founded on the Bible. Patrick has also made it clear he believes the Bible should determine public policy. In 2014, Patrick said that elected officials must look to Scripture when they make policy, “because every problem we have in America has a solution in the Bible.” (Where the Bible addresses problems like greenhouse gas emissions or cybersecurity, I’m at a loss to explain, even with 20 years of biblical study behind me.) His call for a “biblically-based” policy mindset “doesn’t mean we want a theocracy,” he insisted. “But it does mean we can’t walk away from what we believe.”

For Patrick, not “walking away” seems to mean basing policy on his own religious beliefs — as he showed when he opposed same-sex marriage on biblical grounds. (Patrick also did not respond to my request for comment.)

Another dominionist active in Texas politics is conservative firebrand-slash-medical-doctor Steven Hotze. Hotze is linked to Gary DeMar, a dominionist writer

and lecturer. DeMar has called for the United States to be governed by Old Testament law, including instituting the death penalty for gay/lesbian sex. As recently as 2013, Hotze was an officer of DeMar’s dominionist think tank, American Vision; its mission is “to restore America to its biblical foundation.”

Hotze also heads the influential (and hate-group certified) Conservative Republicans of Texas (CRT). In a promotional video, Hotze explains that CRT “is committed to electing Republicans” who will “defend the constitutional liberties that arose from the Christian heritage of our Founding Fathers.” (Hotze did not respond to my requests for comment.)

Government officials have a duty to uphold the Constitution, not to enact their personal religious convictions. They are obliged to serve all of the people, not just members of the officials’ own religious community.

In short, dominionism has risen from an obscure fringe movement to the highest reaches of government here in Texas. No doubt Rushdoony would be pleased. The rest of us, however, have good reason to

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be troubled.

The dominionist goal of having Christianity shape law and policy amounts to the very governmental establishment of religion that the First Amendment explicitly prohibits. It would also appear to violate the Texas Bill of Rights, which states that “no preference shall ever be given by law to any religious society or mode of worship.”

Of course, dominionists insist that none of this matters, because the founders intended to create a “Christian nation.”

Even if some of the founders did mean for Christianity to be normative for law and policy, the question today is: Which Christianity? Christians disagree sharply on a whole host of issues, and dominionists simply don’t speak for many Texas Christians. For example, Hotze’s CRT supports capital punishment and wants to eliminate entitlement programs, and would deny marriage to same-sex couples, while

Patrick would deny Texans reproductive choice and transgender people access to appropriate public restrooms. Those positions directly oppose the gospel as many Christians, myself included, understand it. And in seeking to make law and policy conform to the Bible, dominionists don't speak for the growing number of non-Christians and religious "nones" — those who are religiously unaffiliated, including atheists and agnostics.

To be clear, I'm not saying that religion has no place in the public square. Far from it. Religious persons have just as much right as anyone else to advocate laws and policies that line up with their beliefs and values. Government officials, however, are in a different position. No, they don't have to "walk away from what they believe," as Patrick puts it. Their religious beliefs can inform their personal morality in office — don't lie, don't steal, and so on — and give them comfort and hope or motivate them to serve others. But they can't make policy based on those beliefs. Government officials have a duty to uphold the Constitution, not to enact their personal religious convictions. They are obliged to serve *all* the people, not just members of the officials' own religious community.

Ironically, for all their talk about what those founders intended, it seems that dominionists have failed to heed the wisdom of two of the most prominent, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Madison warned that when government prefers one religion over others, religion suffers. A government that can make Christianity the official religion, he observed, can just as easily prefer one form of Christianity over others — for instance, Catholicism over evangelicalism.

For his part, Jefferson appealed to history. Whenever government officials "have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible" (my emphasis), he wrote, they have ended up creating "false religions."

Christians who seek political domination would do well to heed those wise words. ■

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A Psychiatrist and a Theologian Discuss Christian Ethics

By Arthur Freeman and Fisher Humphreys

What is the difference between personal ethics and social ethics?

Personal ethics is concerned with the lives of individuals; for example, it is ethical for an individual to be kind to his or her friends. Social ethics is concerned with the life of societies; for example, it is ethical for a nation to be kind to persecuted people who apply for asylum.

How might we today think about personal ethics?

One form of personal ethics has been called “conundrum ethics.” The issue in conundrum ethics is: How can I know what is right and what is wrong? For example, is it ever right to tell a lie? Is it ever right to have an abortion? The assumption behind conundrum ethics is that, once I know right from wrong, I will be able to do what is right.

A second form of personal ethics is virtue ethics. The issue in virtue ethics is not how to know right from wrong. The issue is how to do what is right when I know what is right. I know it is right to forgive the people who hurt me and my family, but how can I do this when what I really want is to take revenge on them and make them pay dearly for what they have done? Where can I find the will and the commitment and the resources to forgive them instead?

We believe there is a place in lives of Christians for both conundrum ethics and virtue ethics. There are some ethical dilemmas (such as whether it is ever right to tell a lie), and it is well for us to think about those.

But most of the time in our daily lives—about 99% of the time, we suspect—the issue is not how to know what is right; it is where to find the resources to help us do what already we know is right.

We believe the ancient Christian tradition concerning virtues can help us with this. But, of course, Christians are not the only people with an ancient tradition concerning virtues.

What did the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers say about virtue?

Four centuries before Jesus lived, Plato was already writing about virtues. Along with other things, he referred to four which have become known as the cardinal virtues. They are wisdom, courage, justice and

temperance. Jewish and Christian theologians agree that these are important virtues.

Wisdom is extremely difficult to attain. It doesn’t come because we are well-educated or have lived a long life. Christians may be helped in acquiring wisdom by reflecting on the life of Jesus and by associating with people whom they perceive as having Christian wisdom.

Courage is not bestowed upon us in abundance. It can be a wonderful thing to see a person stand up for moral goodness instead of doing the easy thing. Long years of practice and imitating courageous people may help. We may never learn physical courage in the face of lethal danger. We can, however, become more courageous in

Wisdom is extremely difficult to attain. It doesn't come because we are well-educated or have lived a long life. Christians may be helped in acquiring wisdom by reflecting on the life of Jesus and by associating with people whom they perceive as having Christian wisdom.

our moral beliefs about how to act bravely under many kinds of duress.

People appear to be born with a sense of justice. Little children often say, “That’s not fair,” or they intuitively sympathize with and protect people who are being bullied. As we mature, we may come to see, as Jesus did, the gross forms of systemic injustice. We become more supportive of the poor, the excluded, and other people who are treated badly in our society.

Temperance is concerned with our emotions in the same way that wisdom is concerned with our minds. Emotions are important to human flourishing but, left unchecked, can become destructive. Temperance is self-controlled moderation of the destructive effects of our emotions on our behavior.

The great missionary-doctor Albert Schweitzer once commented that the greatest question any religion faces

is whether it is going to be life-affirming or life-negating. Christianity is emphatically life-affirming. Christ calls us not to withdraw from this present world, but to live in it as Christians. He does not call us to deny our emotions, drives and impulses, but to live with them as Christians. The way that we with our human impulses can live as Christians is to exercise temperance, impulse control.

In America, there is a tendency to think of temperance as abstinence from alcohol; but temperance is moderation, not abstinence. And alcohol is only one of many pleasures over which we must exercise self-control. We can be intemperate about athletics, food, shopping, music or almost any other pleasure. Temperance is the alternative to every form of addiction.

Temperance may be learned to a certain extent, but perhaps never fully achieved. We learn to recognize when intemperance appears, and then we must work to lessen it.

Of the main sources for the Christian way of moral life—the Old Testament, the classical world and Jesus' life and preaching—which is the most important?

For Christians, Jesus is the most important source for moral understanding. He is divine but also fully human, which allows us to better understand Him. Jesus teaches with parables which convey deep meaning. His life is compelling as no other life we know.

Many followers of Jesus believe that they have a personal relationship with Him. This tightens the bond of understanding far more than do the two other sources. The personal ties to Jesus help us to imitate His thoughts and actions. Of course, these ties require thought and contemplation to reveal the full meaning of the Christian way of moral life.

Becoming a disciple of Jesus involves more than an intellectual knowledge about Jesus. We need to meditate upon His life and teachings, repeatedly mulling over them, internalizing them, and making them part of who we are. We must continue to do this throughout our entire lives.

Which did Jesus emphasize more, character or behavior?

Character and behavior are closely related but not identical. Each has a strong effect on the other. Our character influences our behavior; honest people tend to act honestly. Less noticed is the fact that our behavior influences our character; for example, people who repeatedly offer thanks to God eventually become thankful people.

Jesus expressed this memorably. He said that good trees are trees that bear good fruit, and bad trees are trees that bear bad fruit (Mt. 12:33-37). He called His follow-

ers to do good things out of good hearts. Character and behavior both matter.

It can be easier to assess behavior than to assess character. Most people are careful not to reveal much of their dark side which can leave uncertainty about their true character.

According to Jesus, what are some good behaviors arising from good character?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught His followers the noblest way of life we know (see Matthew 5-7). Here are some of the things He said in that greatest of all sermons:

You should have a passionate desire for justice.

You should be merciful.

You should be pure in heart.

You should be peacemakers.

You should be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

You should live up to all of the moral teachings of the Law.

You should never hate anyone.

Character and behavior both matter.

It can be easier to assess behavior than to assess character. Most people are careful not to reveal much of their dark side which can leave uncertainty about their true character.

You should be faithful to your spouse in your mind as well as in your behavior.

You should let your word be your bond.

You should never take revenge on people who hurt you.

You should love your enemies and pray for them.

You should be generous to those who are poor or needy.

You should never display your generosity in public.

You should not pray to impress people, but rather pray only in private and with sincerity.

You should pray that God will extend the kingdom over the lives of more and more people.

You should forgive those who hurt you.

You should not be anxious about the future, but remember that God cares for you.

You should make the kingdom of God your priority in life.

You should not be judgmental of other people.

You should ask God to provide the things you need in your life.

You should treat others the way you want others to treat you.

You should evaluate would-be religious leaders by the way they live.

You should not just learn these instructions, but put them into practice.

What are the major Christian virtues?

Dozens of virtues are named in the New Testament. Here, for example, is a lovely verse from Paul's letter to the Colossians: "You are the people of God. He loved you and chose you for his own. So then you must clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience" (Col. 3:12, TEV). That is a beautiful description of the kinds of persons Jesus wants His followers to be. It is also a beautiful description of the character of Jesus himself.

Very early on Christians began to emphasize three virtues above the others, namely, faith, hope and love. They are mentioned together in the opening words of what may be the earliest Christian writing we have, First Thessalonians (1 Th. 1:3).

Today, faith is frequently equated with beliefs. Beliefs are very important, and faith includes beliefs; but faith is something more than beliefs. It is trust. The faith of Christians is trust in God to be their Lord, their protector, their friend and their God. Christians do not just believe things *about* Jesus; they believe *in* Jesus as their Savior and as the One who can teach them how life should be lived.

Paul famously wrote: "By grace you have been saved through faith" (Eph. 2:8). Grace and faith fit together like hand and glove. Grace is God's love for us. Faith is our trust that God loves and accepts us. We are saved when we trust in God to love and accept us.

Faith is the fundamental response that Christians make to God. Trust in God is part of the identity of Christians, part of who they are, part of their character. Their behavior is profoundly affected by the fact that they trust God and so are not terrified of God.

Hope is a special form of faith, that is, of trust in God. Hope is trust in God concerning the future. Christians have hope for this world and also for the world to come. They trust that in the future God's kingdom is going to come and God's will is going to be done on earth as it is in heaven (Mt. 6:10). They also trust that the ultimate enemy of human beings—death—cannot separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:38-39). The Christian hope is that God's ultimate purposes will be carried out both here on earth and in heaven.

Christians give so much attention to faith and to love that it would be easy for them to neglect hope; but that would not be wise. Hope is indispensable to human

flourishing. Without hope—without anything to look forward to—our spirits shrivel up and we begin to die. We must have hope in order to live, in order to flourish, and in order to function well in life. Paul wrote about people who have no hope and are without God (Eph. 2:12); in God, Christians find hope for this life and for the life to come.

As important as faith and hope are to Christians, love is even more important. "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13). Paul learned the supremacy of love from Jesus. Jesus said that the two greatest commandments in the Law are to love God and to love your neighbor (Mt. 22:34-40). The meaning of all our lives is to become lovers: lovers of God and lovers of other people.

John had a gift for expressing the most profound truths in the simplest language. In a seven-word sentence, he summarized what is most important in Christian theology and in Christian ethics: "We love because God first loved us" (1 John 4:19). This is our theology: God first loved us. And this is our ethics: We love because God first loved us.

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Christian character is character that has been formed in such a way that its dominant elements are faith, hope and love. But how is it possible for human character to be shaped and formed so that this is the case?

Does the Holy Spirit work to help us achieve a moral life?

Christians are not left alone to shape their own character. God helps them by a process known as sanctification. When Paul wrote that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal. 5:22), he was saying that the Spirit of the Lord works to form virtues such as these in the lives of Christians.

The Spirit of God who resides in our souls works with us at many levels: rationally, mysteriously or mystically, in dreams, in psychoanalysis by which we acquire greater self-awareness, and as we engage in self-examination, prayer and contemplation. We suspect that the Spirit is working in ways of which we have no awareness at all. We probably would be astonished if we were to discover all the ways in which the Spirit is working to sanctify us. In any case, it is important for us to trust in the Spirit of God to be working to help us become more virtuous people.

But we do not just trust the Spirit to work in us; we are called to be active rather than passive partners with the Holy Spirit in the formation of virtues in our souls. We must become co-creators with God of our character. Earlier we noted that not only does character influence behavior, but behavior influences character. We engage in certain practices until they form virtues in us.

What are some practices that shape our character and form virtues in us?

Though there is no comprehensive list of all the practices through which the Spirit works to form character, Christians know what some of the most important practices are. We will mention just three.

First among these is public worship. As we join with other Christians to offer our worship to God, we become more fully aware of our own true status, that we are not gods but creations of the true and living God. When that happens, the virtue of humility, respect for God as God, is thereby formed in us. As we praise God for God's love for us, the virtue of love is formed in us. As we give thanks to God, the virtue of gratitude is formed in us.

A second practice is study, Christian education. Dialogue during Sunday school may be the most useful education many of us receive. To sit and discuss with other Christians who share our goal of moral education is a pleasure to many. We learn from our friends and colleagues even when we don't agree with everything that is said. Finding out how someone came to different conclusions than our own can be enlightening. In a dialogue, our own dearly held beliefs may be challenged, providing learning moments for us. As we sincerely search for an understanding of God and of the Christian tradition, virtues such as awe and honesty and reverence are formed in us.

Another practice is Christian ministry. Our souls are shaped as we offer hospitality, as we listen to people talk about their problems, and as we give water to the thirsty and food to the hungry and housing to the homeless. We become generous people by giving generously, over and over again. We become compassionate by following the Golden Rule and treating those who are suffering as we

would have them treat us when we suffer (Mt. 7:12). We become merciful by being merciful toward immigrants, accepting them even though they are different from us, and toward prison inmates, not insisting that they receive the maximum punishment for their crimes.

Can humans achieve moral perfection?

The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, famously taught a doctrine of Christian perfection. He used the word "perfect" because Jesus said, "Be ye perfect" (Mt. 5:48). What Wesley meant by perfection is that it is possible in this present life to love God so thoroughly that we never defy God or rebel against God. Those who reach this state of perfection may still commit sins out of ignorance or because they are tired or distracted or for some other reason, but they never sin out of rebellion against God.

Most Christians agree that Jesus alone achieved sinless, moral perfection. His followers are on the road to moral perfection and must never imagine that they have reached this lofty goal. They can live lives of ongoing moral improvement, and that is a worthy goal. And they

But we do not just trust the Spirit to work in us; we are called to be active rather than passive partners with the Holy Spirit in the formation of virtues in our souls. We must become co-creators with God of our character.

can live that way confident that the Spirit will continue to work in their lives until in the life to come they become morally perfect. Paul affirmed this when he wrote that God "who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). John also affirmed it when he wrote: "When [Jesus] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." And then John added: "All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:2-3). ■

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Left Behind: How End Times Heresies Undermine Evangelical Action on Climate

By Don Golden

Climate Week kicked off in New York City recently (September 23-29) as a matter of global urgency. Organized in collaboration with the United Nations, the week was meant to showcase climate initiatives and to discuss what more can be done to reduce the risks associated with climate change, especially for the poor and vulnerable.

Without urgent action, the World Bank estimates that 100 million more people could be pushed into poverty by 2030. They also estimate that as more and more vulnerable people flee regions most at risk, an estimated 140 million people could become climate migrants.

When it comes to climate action, more and more Christians are engaging. Our own Red Letter authors have taken on a range of related topics that you can read about here. Last week, Young Evangelicals for Climate Action issued a call for students to join 16 year old Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg and students across the world striking for climate justice. This is good.

Unfortunately, this kind of conviction represents the exception to the evangelical norm. According to a 2015 survey from the Pew Research Center, evangelicals were the least likely religious group to believe the earth is warming due to human activity. Only 28 percent of evangelicals accepted the scientific consensus compared to 50 percent of the general U.S. population.

This is baffling. The Bible claims that God made humans and placed them in the garden God created and told them to “to work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15). So why are those Christians who claim the most fidelity to the Bible — evangelical Christians — the least responsive to the conditions of the earth they are called to steward?

Beyond creation care and our responsibility to steward the earth, there is the matter of Christian mission to the most vulnerable. The Bible says the gospel is God’s message for the poor (Luke 4), yet the world’s poorest 2.5 billion people, many of whom live off smallholder farms and fisheries, are critically at risk by the impact of climate change on their sources of food and income. So why is it that those whose very name — evangelical — means “preachers of good news to the poor,” don’t believe the bad news about climate change or the threat it poses to the poor they are called

to serve?

It’s not like the Bible is silent when it comes to human-induced global calamities. Romans chapter 8 talks about a creation that has been groaning under the consequences of human action and one that waits in eager expectation for the children of God to show up (Romans 8:19). Yet, evangelicals can’t seem to hear the groaning creation or see the children striking for their futures that now seem condemned by present inaction.

This indifference to responsible environmental action is too bad, because Romans also points to a future full of hope for the earth. The Apostle Paul wrote to the

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Romans that creation will be liberated from its human-induced decay. This is Christian teaching.

Biblical eschatology — those teachings about how things end — should cause Christians to be the most hopeful climate activists on the planet, because they believe God’s promise of an earth they have helped to liberate (Romans 8:21). This is not, however, the eschatology that animates the popular evangelical vision. I suspect that today’s evangelical church-goer is more influenced by the distorted theologies of Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye than the hopeful vision of the Apostle Paul.

In the 1970s, Hal Lindsey’s famous book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, clumsily applied end-time prophecies in the Bible to the Cold War and Middle East politics current at the time, fanning the apocalyptic fears of an already paranoid American populace. The

Second Coming of Christ was held to be imminent and the rapture of the church promised before the coming Great Tribulation. The practical outworking of this reductionist and unorthodox theology has been called “evacuation theology” — or the earth is going to be destroyed and good Christians should ready themselves to be raptured away to heaven. Forget the environment. Why take responsibility for a soon-to-be-destroyed earth?

More recently, Tim LaHaye brought his version of evacuation theology to the masses, selling more than 80 million copies of his distorted reading of the book of *Revelation* through his Left Behind series. Left Behind’s fabricated struggle between a pious remnant of faithful Christians and a globalist anti-Christ cabal may have been entertaining, but it did nothing to cultivate responsible Christian living in the face of real environmental concerns. Forget climate change. Why care for an earth that, along with billions of damned humans, will be left behind?

Is it these dramatic misreadings of the Bible that have formed the practical eschatology of mainstream Evangelicalism? Whatever the cause, when it comes to science-informed action and conscientious care for the earth, it is evangelicals who are being left behind.

For clarity and conviction on climate justice we have to look elsewhere. Last week, it was a 16-year-old Swedish girl who spoke the truth like a biblical prophet:

My name is Greta Thunberg. I have not come to offer prepared remarks at this hearing. I am instead attaching my testimony. It is the IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C [SR1.5] which was released on October 8, 2018. I am submitting this report as my testimony because I don’t want you to listen to me. I want you to listen to the scientists. And I want you to unite behind the science. And then I want you to take action.

At the time he wrote the book of *Revelation*, John,

“the disciple whom Jesus loved,” was suffering in prison. In the genre of a highly stylized and cryptic text, he offered a vision of the final hope Christians should expect in Christ. Despite the merciless power of Rome aligned then against the followers of Jesus, John saw a day coming when the liberating power of heaven would crash into the chaos and suffering of earth. He wrote his graphic letter to inspire hope against the despair of his day.

Christians today should put aside the Christian fictions of Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye and pick up the biblical vision of an earth renewed under the stewardship of God’s children. John “saw the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God” (Revelations 21:2), which he wrote to inspire faithful living. The Bible teaches that heaven is coming to earth. Evangelicals need to get clear about this biblical mandate, otherwise it is they who will be left behind. ■

Don Golden is Executive Director of Red Letter Christians and has served in leadership at World

Whatever the cause, when it comes to science-informed action and conscientious care for the earth, it is evangelicals who are being left behind.

Vision, World Relief, and Mars Hill Bible Church. He co-wrote “Jesus Wants to Save Christians” with Rob Bell. This essay first appeared in RedLetterChristians.org on September 24, 2019 and is published here with permission. Readers of Christian Ethics Today are encouraged to subscribe to the Red Letter Christians movement.

Footnotes and other references to every article published can be found in the Archives of christianethicstoday.com

From Our Bookshelves...

Recommended Reading

Revolutionary Love: A Political Manifesto to Heal and Transform the World

by Rabbi Michael Lerner, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2019

Reviewed by J. Alfred Smith, Sr.

After reading reviews of *Revolutionary Love* by celebrated scholars and review critics I had serious reservations about honoring Michael Lerner's request to write my own review. In fact he asked me twice to do so.

I thought that any book authored by Lerner and published by the University of California Press at Berkeley would automatically grab the eye and attract the attention of thoughtful readers. The book title, *Revolutionary Love* written for this era that is dusty and dry with hate and societal death is more than adequate in assisting readers who have the life urge for healing. None is more qualified than Michael Lerner whose entire professional life and practice is committed to healing the fractures of society even at a great personal cost, including the risk of limb and life.

Unlike the philosophical writers from Plato to Descartes who address the human condition in essential terms, Lerner speaks pragmatically in relational language that is fully human. Love is relational and is the *sine qua non* for recognizing the intrinsic value of human life.

Extrinsic perspectives on the worth and value of life dehumanize and commodify humans to be things to be exploited and used as means for gratifying the ends of immoral power. In contrast, *Revolutionary Love* boldly refuses to be paralyzed by death-urge activists who promote racism, xenophobia, classism, consumerism, materialism, militarism, sexism, ageism, and all other isms that divide and destroy life on the planet and even the planet itself. *Revolutionary Love* is a sane invitation to implement strategies for building in the twenty-first century a caring society with love, justice, and trustworthiness. Without trustworthiness there can be no safety or security for any of us.

We all can use this book. Trust me. ■

J. Alfred Smith, Sr. is Emeritus Pastor of Oakland, California's Allen Temple Baptist Church, where he was first called as Senior Pastor in 1971. He retired as Senior Pastor in 2009 and is widely known and revered as a prophetic preacher and writer, a mentor to many, and a significant influence on the church.

Building Good Life for All: Transforming Income Inequality in our Communities

by L. Shannon Jung Westminster John Knox Press, 2017 125pp

Reviewed by Janet Speer

L. Shannon Jung is a Presbyterian pastor, Professor of Town and Country Ministry, and Emeritus for Saint Paul School of Theology. He studies poverty and affluence and in this book he calls to transform our neighborhoods.

He credits his childhood in the Congo where his parents served as missionary dentists for the development of his passion to address the underlying causes of poverty. His message begins with a warning that the "poor" and the middle class are rapidly becoming one population. The "middle" live in an insecure world in which all areas of economic, social and spiritual American life seems to conspire against them. Jung clarifies and documents the problem and then shows us what to do.

Two acronyms define the societies addressed throughout the book: ALICE (Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed) and ALEC (Asset-Limited, Employed, Constrained). ALICE represents the poor while ALEC represents the middle class, but the two groups of people have started to merge. Using data from his home state of Florida, and national statistics from the United Way, Jung reports that America is becoming 50% either ALICES or ALECs and that they are interdependent. The effects of this alarming statistic are felt among all segments of society and are especially important for Christians to notice and to act.

Jung provides clear tactics for Christian action, dividing his book into four strategies: Relief (charity), Self-help, Cultural formation (influencing public opinion) and Governmental action. His description of each tactic is bolstered with many stories and examples. The specificity of these chapters is a welcome break from books that provide theoretical explanations of the impoverished and the shrinking middle class without the means to address them. Jung is very clear on what he thinks we should do.

Most of his examples come from his home state of Florida where he has worked for many years. The stories make for engaging reading; especially the many examples of groups who have made an impact on the problem. They are “feel good” stories that encourage the reader to believe it is possible to attack a seemingly hopeless situation. If we value “fairness,” he says, “care for children, equal opportunity, mobility, non-discrimination, work, making a contribution, national destiny and dignity of life,” we need to look at the populations caught up in a quagmire where day-to-day living challenges quality living.

He describes how he had experienced life as an ALEC himself. L. He tells of his experience with the fear that accompanies poverty, constantly worrying about money, attending a free dental clinic (with disastrous results), and found that “flourishing” was not in the cards. He discovered when one is living in fear, it is all but impossible to move forward, not only because there is an empty pocketbook, but because there is a paralyzing fear of living an undignified life.

But fear lingers in all populations and that is part of the problem. The wealthy and upper-middle classes are not exempt. Using Henri Nouwen’s parable in the book, *Lifesigns*, we see a world where people with means are so fearful that they cling to resources, consume, build walls and become spiritually numb. “Flourishing” doesn’t happen there either. Their pocketbooks are full but the paralyzing fear is still at hand. To reach the Shalom that Jesus wanted for us, the

harmony of creation and the parts of the body Paul tell us that make us whole, we need to find other ways for everyone to flourish. Jung gives us accessible ways to reach out and become a supportive community; one where generosity and gratitude undergird values; actions that calm fears.

The final chapter provides a worksheet for church groups to discover where they “stand” in the struggle for a dignified life for all, taking us from the abstract to the precise. Study groups can use the worksheet and discussion questions following each chapter to help congregants think more deeply on several different levels. Participants will be asked to explore their former understanding of the problem, look at what is not working with current programs, what is right about others, and what they can do to become part of the solution. This hands-on approach may very well take a regular church group from exploration to action.

I liked this book. As an adult Sunday School teacher, I am always searching for works that challenge us to think, and then “set feet” to the discoveries. Jung is unapologetic about his liberal bent, but the material is specific and compelling enough to resonate to most all political persuasions. It is information we cannot avoid.

As Jung says early in the book, all populations will suffer from the movement of the ALECs to the ALICEs. We are foolish if we ignore the symptoms, and we are missing the call of Christ if we look the other way and rest comfortably on our platitudes. *Building the Good Life for All* offers us a fresh look at the issues, then provides step-by-step actions. A church might very well change a struggling neighborhood to a flourishing one if they explore these new possibilities. ■

Janet Speer is a lay leader, playwright, Professor of Performing Arts, and Director of the Summer Theatre at Lees-McRae College in Banner Elk, NC.

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