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An Editor's Perks: Inspiration Personified

Patrick Anderson, editor

One of the benefits of my work as editor of Christian Ethics Today is the interesting people I get to meet and befriend and whose writings and thinking I wish to discuss or solicit for the journal.

During COVID, most of my conversations with writers has been through telephone and other electronic methods. As I look at the names and reputations of authors listed on the CET website, I feel like a chocolate loosed in the Hershey factory. The writers in this issue add to that company.

Well before the days of the pandemic, my work in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship had placed me in the company of a wide array of Baptists and other theologians, ministers, and laypersons of incredible abilities and influence in the Church. As missions advocate for CBF, I also met many diverse brothers and sisters in Europe, Asia and Africa, some of whom have written for our journal and have become close friends and resources for me.

I have been inspired and informed by the stories and personal reflections of people who experienced Communism and authoritarianism in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. My personal "Mandela pilgrimage" from Soweto to Robben Island, and similar exposure to China Christian Council leaders who lived through Mao's "cultural revolution," have affected me deeply. The outside views of fellow Christians regarding events in America have given me a more nuanced understanding of the ways we are seen and understood by others.

One such friend is a South African fellow named Allan Aubrey Boesak. I met him personally several years ago when he was the keynote speaker at a meeting of the New Baptist Covenant, a movement created and developed by former President Jimmy Carter. I had been familiar with some of his writings, beginning with *Farewell to Innocence*, his 1976 doctoral work

in which he explicated the influence of Liberation Theology in his own ministry and theological development. He has written a score of books since then which can set one's soul on fire.

Alongside Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela, Allan helped lead the opposition to apartheid in South Africa. He is an advocate for reconciliation as both clergyman and political activist for social justice, a prophetic voice with gob smacking insights to Bible stories, and passionate urgency as a prophetic voice for the Church, born of his own life and experience.

With the help and encouragement of our mutual friend, Wendell Griffen, we have become friends and collaborators. In this issue of the journal, I include an excerpt from his newest book, a commentary on the

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book of Judges. He expresses the truth as he understands it from the Bible and tells it "with the bark off." I pray that we can all learn from Allan Boesak.

As he has written elsewhere, "When we go before God, God will ask, 'Where are your wounds?' And we will say, 'I have no wounds.' And God will ask, 'Was there nothing worth fighting for?'" ■

Bowing Down to the Bramble: Parables, Politics, Perils and Perseverance

By Allan Boesak

As we are about to enter the 30th year of our democratic experiment, I believe South Africans have much to learn from the Book of Judges in the Bible. Looking around the globe today though, so has the rest of the world. To help us think through some of the most daunting issues facing South Africa, and the global community today, I begin this collection of political and spiritual reflections with a meditative look at this most fascinating book.

Judges is a book in which ancient Israel tells its stories about extraordinary men and women in calamitous times—times of great difficulty and strife. It is a book about struggles against oppression and about the leaders and icons of those struggles—heroes of the people.

South Africans know about those struggles and those who led us in them over the centuries past. “Judges” were not arbiters of legal disputes, as we know them in our courts today, or even in the courts of ancient Israelite society. Nor were they rulers. The title of the book in the Afrikaans Bible, “Rigters” means persons giving direction to the people in times of need, may perhaps give a better sense of what ancient Israel had in mind. They were brilliant, charismatic leaders, men and women of great courage and, crucially, from among the people, called by God and chosen by the people to lead them in their fights for freedom and their wars of liberation and independence.

“Then Yahweh raised up judges who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them” (2:16). Note the connection between the three key words here: *power, deliver, plunder*. Today, following Antonio Gramsci, we would call them “organic” leaders. We have had quite a few of those. Like us, the Book of Judges is not shy to celebrate the role women played in those struggles. War is a constant presence in these stories and, consequently, from the first pages to the last, Judges is a disturbingly violent book.

Tellingly however, Judges does not have the strident, triumphalist tones that we find in the Book of Joshua. Joshua tells the story of ancient Israel’s violent conquest of ancient Palestine (Canaan) and it is a triumphant blitzkrieg. Israel’s military might is unstoppable. No nation remains standing before it. The author seems to revel in the endless bloodletting and the brutal abandon with which cities, humans and animals

are destroyed. That tone is missing in Judges. In fact, I find that in Judges, the stories about war and violence have a deeply tragic tinge about them.

Judges begins by telling us that the Joshua story of a complete, triumphant conquest of Canaan, though beloved, is not correct. Israel had failed in this quest; hence the constant, never-ending wars led by the judges against the people of Canaan, the indigenous people of the land. That kind of honesty is hard to come by. Sometimes our politicians talk as if the struggle against apartheid and neo-colonialism is over; that apartheid in all its forms has been overcome by a new dawn, and we still act as if that “victory” was celebrat-

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ed by our tanks rolling through the streets of Pretoria, the “amandlas!” and “vivas!” bouncing off the walls of the Union Buildings. Every January 8, celebrating the birthday of the African National Congress, we listen to and revel in the triumphant speeches. We dance and sing and toyi-toyi, hoping that the loudness of our songs and slogans will be able to drown out the reality that the real revolution was stolen and replaced by a political capitulation concocted by the elites of the old, white, apartheid capitalist class, and sealed with the compliance of our new political aristocracy.

The truth is that we are in serious battle with the consequences of an incomplete revolution, an incomplete reconciliation, and an incomplete restoration. We are still in a struggle to find the true meaning of freedom, and how to face the responsibilities and challenges that come with freedom. But that kind of truthfulness is a

minefield where politics rarely wants to go. In *Selfless Revolutionaries*, I devote a full chapter to a discussion on the question of our incomplete revolution.

The writers of the early chapters of *Judges* apparently decided that telling the truth, even though it is hard, shows respect for the people, their memories and their sacrifices. That telling begins with the very first words of the very first chapter and grapples with that painful truth until, in chapter 3 when the author finally finds a way to explain away the failures, which are, as so often is the case with religious people, theological: “Now these are the nations that the LORD left [in Canaan].” (My emphasis) It is God’s doing, in other words, and here’s why: Yahweh did it to “test all those in Israel who had no experience of any war in Canaan” (v.2). The author is speaking of those who had come, were welcomed and, for successive generations, had lived peacefully with the original inhabitants of the land. To replace the presence of peace with the necessity of war becomes a test of Israel’s faithfulness and obedience to God. Obedience to God does not mean making friends and neighbors out of those we term “enemies” and learning to live together in a world we must all share. Obedience is first making sure that for us they are eternal enemies, and then exterminating those enemies to the last man, woman and child; attacking and razing their cities to the ground, taking possession of them, renaming them, and living in them as if the former inhabitants never existed. All the while, of course, giving praise to God’s goodness for allowing us to do this, fulfilling God’s will, and solidifying our power and dominance.

Yet, the remnants of the glorification of war are hard to let go of, and so are the shreds of glory clinging to the old conquest stories, even if these were not completely true. However, now committed, the author has to double down on the twisted theological logic. So the author continues, still in verse 1, “*It was only that successive generations might know war, to teach those who had no experience of it before ...*” (3:1, 2).

See immediately here a dilemma that *Judges* does not even attempt to solve. If the author had said that some nations in Canaan were friendly and hospitable, and had accepted the newcomers, but that the kings of some of the other nations had ambitions of domination and would not let Israel “rest,” but attacked and oppressed them and that, therefore, Israel had to defend its new-found freedom, that would offer a different perspective. Determined not to be taken back to the days of slavery they had experienced in Egypt, Israel’s defensive violence would be perfectly understandable.

With that in mind, chapter 2, verse 16, quoted above,

would make immediate sense: Israel was under attack, sometimes overrun and oppressed; and in such times Yahweh raised up judges to defend the people’s right to freedom. Then this would have been a different story. This also, would be in line with what well-respected Hebrew Bible scholars George Mendenhall and Norman Gottwald had proposed—namely that these fights were not offensive battles in wars of conquest waged by the Israelites. They were struggles against oppression and domination. This is not Joshua’s wars of aggression and conquest. This would be Israel, defending its liberation against new oppressors in the new land where they had settled.

However, the text does not say that. Accordingly, the strangeness of the theological logic deepens. Yahweh wants not only to “test” the new generation’s willingness to go to war, Yahweh actually wants to “teach” them how to make war. Never mind Isaiah’s fervent wish that swords be turned into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks; and never mind Yahweh’s intention that never again shall “*nation lift up sword*

It is a theological trend of thought that we will find regularly in what Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann has called the “royal theology trajectory” in the Bible. In other words, the theology of the establishment of the mighty and the powerful. It is a theology of violence, of unbridled, chauvinistic, religious nationalism.

against nation, and neither shall they learn to make war anymore.” (Is. 2:4). All that idealistic, unrealistic talk has no place here. Yahweh’s desire is not for peace and harmony with the peoples of the land, but for Israel’s younger generation to learn how to make war. God really wants that total destruction, that total land theft, the total annihilation of Canaan’s people.

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tory,” which seeks to give voice to the people’s faith in Yahweh as a God of justice, peace and steadfast love.

And not only had the conquest failed, the Canaanites seemed to have won the hearts and minds of Israel’s new generations: *“So the Israelites lived among the Canaanites ... and they took their daughters as wives for themselves, and their own daughters they gave to their sons ...”* And then the author adds the final blow: *“And they worshipped their gods”* (3:6). The tragedy seems complete. But which is the greater tragedy? That the Israelites had lived in peace with the Canaanites and that, consequently, they did not “know war” anymore? That they intermarried, or that they worshipped the strange gods of the Canaanites?

II

For me, the Book of Judges is not so much about the failures of single persons, heroes who disappoint, charismatic leaders who let God and the people down, sometimes becoming the personification of the people’s failure to believe, to have faith and trust in God, to stay faithful to God – their overreach and hubris, forgetting their dependence upon Yahweh. For me, the overriding issue and, in a sense, the real message of the book is the exposure of the failure of violence as solution to political and social questions and challenges. What may read as glorification of violence, I hear as a hundred alarm bells clanging on every page. The tragedy in Judges is not that the heroes failed the people, or that military victories were so scarce and those that did come about, were so fleeting, and unable to bring the lasting and sustainable peace the people sought. The tragedy is violence, all by itself, and its fatal lure, its seductive power, and Israel’s embrace of it. The tragedy is to discover just how far ancient Israel has strayed from the spirit of the Song of Miriam in Exodus 15. Every military victory ends with the announcement of the period Israel had “rest.” After Othniel, 40 years; after Ehud, 80 years; after Deborah again only 40 years.

It sounds like us. After Mandela, what? Five years, perhaps not even, for have we not had the violence of perpetuated impoverishment, hunger, empty and broken promises of political banditry at the highest levels since the “new era” began? And as a result, have we not had what we euphemistically called service delivery protests across the country every other week, it seems? And, in the euphoric days, when our people still believed we had hope of some kind, before we began to really see the consequences of the secret deals and the elite pacts, taste the bitter fruits of our pre-negotiated negotiations? And now, standing as we do among the ruins of our ideals and aspirations, hopes

and dreams forged in the fires of centuries of struggle, our 30 years of democratic endeavor, filled with strife caused by purposeful neglect, unprincipled politics, mind-boggling corruption and visionless leadership, we are uncomfortably close to the “40 years” refrain from Judges. Is this what a pre-determined and willingly chosen downfall looks like?

After one judge called Shamgar, the years of “rest” are not even mentioned. His whole life reads like a footnote bordering on what I imagine as an indifferent shrug of the shoulders: *“After [Ehud] came Shamgar son of Anath ... He killed six hundred Philistines.”* That is all there is to say in the single verse that mentions this leader of Israel. The killings made no difference it seems. The author seems almost dismissive: *“He too delivered Israel”* (3:31). Samson’s death, like that of a modern suicide bomber, his whole life dedicated to struggle, four whole chapters of stories, failings as well as heroics, is summed up in just 17 words: *“So those he killed at his death were more than those he had killed during his life.”* (16:30b).

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Contrast these words with the words of the prophet Elisha in II Kings 6. There the armies of the Arameans have surrounded Israel. They are stationed across the hills in their thousands. Elisha’s servant panics. “What shall we do?” To this the prophet responds, *“Do not be afraid. Those who are with us, are more than those who are with them”* (v.16). On the lips of the prophet, the “more” does not refer to killings and slaughter. Neither do they refer to the armies of Israel’s king. For Elisha, that “more” is the presence, the faithfulness, the trustworthiness of Yahweh. What follows is what most scholars describe as a myth, and some as a miracle. Upon Elisha’s prayer, the Aramean army is struck with blindness and led to a different city, where their eyes are again opened.

The point, however, is not whether this is a myth or

a miracle. The point is in what follows in the lessons the Bible is trying to teach us. When the king of Israel sees what is happening and that he basically has the enemy army, confused and disorientated, at his mercy, his first instinct is to grab the opportunity for glory: he wants to annihilate them. The twice repeated “Shall I kill them?” shows the nauseating eagerness for glory soaked in blood. Perhaps the king was just a plain old warmonger. Perhaps he was thinking of his shares in the weapons industry; or perhaps his domestic ratings were so worryingly low he reckoned that only his heroics in war could bring him favor with the people.

But in Samaria, Elijah is more in tune with God than was his mentor Elisha, on Mount Carmel. War is not the answer. He is firm: *“No! Set food and water before them, so that they may eat and drink; and let them go to their master. So he prepared for them a great feast ...”* (v.22, 23a). The true prophet of God abhors the violence, does not revel in bloodshed, has no thirst for brutality, does not seek the vainglory of war. What Elisha accomplishes is a victory for diplomacy and nonviolence of epic proportions.

Where are the prophets of God who would give such wise counsel to the Bidens and the Putins of our world? And if Cyril Ramaphosa had the counsel of true prophets of God, would the tragedy of the Marikana massacre have happened? Lessons, lessons, lessons.

But let us go back to Judges, Shamgar, and his 600 killings. Even after all that, the hoped-for deliverance did not come. It is, after all is said and done, inef- fably sad. From there, it’s all downhill. And it is also from this point on, in chapter 18, that we begin to hear the refrain, *“And in those days there was no king in Israel,”* soon to be followed by the words that had come to complete the sentence, *“Everyone did what was right in their own eyes.”*

The durable peace Israel was seeking was not an unattainable dream, a mirage, the idealistic chatter of a few romantic populists, however; and Judges acknowledges it. In that same chapter 18, we are told how the tribe of Dan, still on a campaign of aggressive expansion and land theft (what Hitler would call the campaign for lebensraum), attacked another city called Laish. They set upon the people, (*“a people quiet and unsuspecting”* the writer says twice), *“put them all to the sword, and burnt down the city”* (18:27). By now, these scenes are depressingly familiar. But they are familiar for another reason.

They remind us so much of what the State of Israel has been doing to Palestinians and their land for over 70 years. It is downright scary. The aggression with which that theft is taking place, making way for new

Israeli settlers at a breathtaking pace, the way the violence is normalized, executed as a matter of course and with an impunity just as natural. No big deal: It’s just “putting facts on the ground,” as Benyamin Netanyahu has stated, and every politician understands that. That Palestinians are systematically dispossessed, dis- owned, displaced, and disinherited? No matter; that’s the way of the politics of the bramble. Get used to it, get with it or get out of the way.

But the point I want to make here does not lie in the “natural flow” of war, land theft and destruction as depicted in Judges. Tucked away in the middle of this tale, so that it almost always goes unnoticed, in verse seven we read what the five Danites discover as they do their reconnaissance of the area. They saw, Judges tells us, a very desirable stretch of land, *“a broad land,” fertile and rich, inhabited by people living there “securely ... quiet and unsuspecting, lacking nothing on earth, and possessing wealth.”* Laish was a peaceful city, hence a secure city, hence a prosperous people. They actually existed, totally disproving and

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discrediting the perverse logic and the dominant narra- tives of the warmongers—that it is war and dispossession of others that bring peace and security.

As soon as the men from Dan saw the beauty and richness of the land, they just knew it was God’s will for them to claim it for themselves. In their hearts and minds, their God always walks hand-in-hand with greed, the lust for acquisitiveness and dominion. Upon seeing so prosperous a land, such wealth, and so peaceful and unsuspecting a people, they drool at the sight, and so does their God. *They say to them- selves what those Christian imperialist invaders from Holland and Britain said when they saw the beauty and bounty of this corner of Africa: “The land is broad – God has surely given it into [our] hands – a place where there is no lack of anything on earth” (v 10).*

The author's choice of words is revealing. The people of Laish are prosperous, "living securely." That is because, unlike so many around them, they are not a warlike people. If one is perpetually at war, all one's resources go towards the war. There is no money, or time, or inclination left for the necessary things, such as infrastructure, agriculture or the pursuit of the things that make for peace. War does not allow for the cultivation of olive trees, fig trees or for the vine to ripen and produce wine. That wonderful vision seen by the prophet Micah, that *"they will all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid"* (4:4), is a vision of peace that is impossible for a war-like people with a war economy, and a war-mongering mindset. It is impossible for a people living in constant fear that what we "are doing over there," will someday be done to us "over here."

American scholar of politics, Chalmers Johnson, in his searing analysis of the workings of American empire, called it "blowback." Preacher/prophet Dr. Jeremiah Wright, in one of the most stunning sermons I have ever heard, spoke of "America's chickens coming home to roost."

The United States under Joseph Biden has raised its military budget to over \$780 billion, more than those of the ten nations next down the row all put together, including Russia and China. But America's roads and bridges are falling apart. There is no proper health care for millions of Americans. Their public education is a disgrace. America's infamous one percent is immensely rich while the vast majority of Americans are battling to survive. Experts tell us that one percent of America's military budget could secure fresh, drinking water for the rest of the world. One, no matter how rich, cannot maintain 800 military bases across the world, be involved in wars against seven countries at one time, have regimes of sanctions against over 30 countries as we speak, and tell one's people that they are "prosperous" or, in the words of Nelson Mandela, "a nation at peace with itself and the world." A war economy is an economy in slow-motion free fall.

When the most eagerly awaited and most frequently question asked is, "Who do we go up against next?" and not, "How can we give all our children a better future?" or "Can we solve the problem of homelessness?" that is a country in serious decline.

But the decline is not only economic. There is, as the true prophets of God in America keep on warning their people, also the political and moral decline to take into account. Despite the never-ending wars or perhaps because of it, seeing the need for the creation of equally never-ending waves of fear, America is not

a "secure" people. Its democracy, despite the screaming propaganda, is not only in decline. According to a recent study by scholars from Princeton and Northwestern Universities, democracy in the United States is at best "accidental" and at worst an oligarchy. Its laws are written by what they call lobbyists, who bribe and buy votes with gay abandon in Congress; only Americans don't call that "corruption," as they should, because it is legal. "Come back when you have money!" is the telling caption under the picture of the crowds protesting at the Capitol accompanying the study.

Never-ending wars need never-ending, ever newly created enemies. That, in turn, needs the constant and unbridled demonization of others, at the moment not so much the Muslims, but the Russians. (Though I am sure that Yeminis and Sudanese will disagree.). We know the hatred will return in full force once the hysteria about Russia and Ukraine comes to an end; for that peculiar appetite, once whetted, has to be satisfied. Waiting their turn in the background are the Chinese.

The people of Laish "possessed wealth," but the city was peaceful for its people felt secure, which, in the context of the times, speaks to a system where wealth was more evenly distributed, lessening, even preventing, the tensions in society that vast and unsustainable inequalities bring, promoting a sense of common wellbeing.

In America, I have seen that creating enemies is an industry, and an extremely profitable one at that. Making profits out of self-made disasters and cultivated needs is the lifeblood of neoliberal capitalism. The mass media have developed it into something of an art. In the six years my family had lived there and I had taught there, I watched in awe as this phenomenon played itself out on television, and with a gusto that is beyond belief. Watching this on television from somewhere else is one thing. Up close and personal is quite another. That does not make for a secure people however. They cannot be secure because they have to constantly lie to themselves - about others, about the

world and about themselves. The language of war and aggression, of lies, deceit and demonization is incapable of forming the grammar of peace and security.

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When the fire of hatred is in our hearts, the words of peace, when we finally find them to speak about our favorite causes, burn the roofs of our mouths and scorch our tongues so that the words come out twisted and unreal, as with the selective indignation over Ukraine, so painfully apparent over the few past weeks as I have been writing this.

Shocked perhaps, but not at all surprised, we heard from the mouths of one Western journalist after the other the racist sympathies for people who are “white” and “Christian”—not Syrians or Africans, but people “like us,” from white, European, “civilized” countries. But those whose hearts are pure in these matters know this to be true: Those who cannot weep for Palestinians and Yemenis and Iraqis, cannot weep for Ukrainians. Those tears are like molten lava running over the soul.

But the scary analogies with the modern State of Israel continue. For the unsuspecting people of Laish, as for the Palestinians, the text says, in a seemingly throwaway sentence, “*there was no deliverer*” (18:28). Indeed. No Western country, even while watching the land theft, the murder and mayhem visited upon the Palestinians, come to their aid. They don’t have the shame to even look away, for they watch with their eye keenly on the next opportunity to present the Palestinians with one more “peace plan,” yet another “road map to peace,” which they draw up so that all roads lead to more pacification, more Israeli impunity, more dispossession. They watch the growth of Israeli settler communities on stolen Palestinian land, the “legalisation” of the Israeli apartheid state, the expansion of the Israeli settler colony, and they do not find that in the least obscene, or objectionable, beyond a few pious words accompanying the wringing of hands that have no meaning and no intention of justice. It’s

all permissible because the Palestinians are doomed to pay the price for centuries of Western anti-Semitism and Western guilt. This is where white privilege and white exceptionalism ultimately take us, always stoked, always protected, and always justified by the heresies of Christian Zionism.

Not so long ago, I was in a rather tense Zoom discussion with theologians from Europe. A German colleague, high representative of the German Church, explained how his heart melted in sympathy when, on a trip to the Holy Land, he saw what Palestinians were going through. But then he said, “I go over to my Jewish hosts and I think of what we have done to them, and all I can do is ask my Palestinian friends to ‘build that bridge and make peace.’” Note the wording though: He looks at the Jews and when he remembers what Germans have done to the Jews, his heart melts again, but this time with guilt. So, in Germany and Europe in general, they actually pretend they can wash the guilt of their past off their hands with the blood of Palestinians, and still find favor with God, make peace

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in the world, and hold onto their innocence. Note also how he shifts the responsibility for peace from the powerful to the powerless. As if the Zionist regime is always ready for peace, but the savage Palestinians are not; so it is they who must “build that bridge.” For Christians, that should be a horror of heretical proportions. That is what I thought and that is what I said.

European, American and South African Christian Zionists, in the name of Jesus, and under orders from the American empire, crucify Palestinians on a daily basis as they once did Jesus, the One from occupied Galilee in occupied Palestine. Today, they compound the pain of Palestinians, and their crimes against the Palestinians, with the unbelievable hypocrisy we are seeing with the war between Ukraine, backed by the U.S. and NATO, and Russia. No constant howls of indignation for Palestine; no saturation of news 24/7 calling for sympathy and solidarity, not even a whiff

of recognition that what is happening is wrong, even though they all know that what Israel is doing is a crime against humanity. Now they know perfectly what a war crime is.

And the hypocrisy screams to the heavens. I watched, amazed, as Condoleezza Rice, National Security Advisor for George Bush, deeply involved in the deceptions about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and in the lies they told to the American people and the world, a war criminal, in other words (like George Bush, Dick Cheney and Tony Blair), spoke without the slightest sign of discomfort about Putin. How he should be hauled before the International Criminal Court, as if she herself, and all her colleagues did not belong there together with Putin. As if the U.S. itself had not refused to join the ICC, and had not promulgated an act that allowed it to invade The Hague should it dare to charge any American with a war crime. And most disturbing of all, her American television interviewer sat there, allowing her to pontificate unhindered, as if all this were not worth a single challenge or correction.

The sanctions against Russia are gushing out like water from a broken pipe. What, for over 20 years we were told was impossible and impractical (because it was Israel), is now suddenly possible, and practical; and worse, the right and moral thing to do. Those impossible sanctions are announced and implemented, overnight. We argued endlessly in the 1980s that taking such a firm, nonviolent stand against apartheid was in actual fact the indicator, if not the litmus test, for the morality of politics and for the integrity of Christian witness. I vividly remember not only the vacuous arguments, but also the deeply emotional reactions.

Again and again, I have made the argument that that same situation pertains to the question of Palestine and the call for boycotts, disinvestment and sanctions. There were all kinds of quasi-theological arguments, skewed, and highly hypocritical, biblical references to "love, reconciliation and "patience." Now, all of a sudden, that moral standard exists, and it is Russia. It is an ideologized theology that fits the crime. They act if the deepest motivation is not the profits that are being made by stoking the war; as if the reality is not, as Democratic Representative Adam Schiff blandly admitted on December 22, 2020, "We must fight Russia over there in Ukraine so we don't have to fight Russia over here." In other words, America must get the Ukrainians to fight Russia till the last drop of Ukrainian blood is shed.

Like the Danites, after the slaughter of the people of Laish, "*set up an idol for themselves*" (v.30), the Americans and Europeans are eagerly building altars

for their idols of war and false gods of capitalism. But the sacrifice on those altars are the children, the women and the grandmothers of Ukraine they parade so piously and shamelessly on their television screens. The sanctimonious, hateful, spiteful glee is almost worse than the hypocrisy. But as the writer of this part of Judges points out in the subtle mention of the idols the Danites now pay fealty to: They need those idols and false gods because God has long departed.

III

The tragedy in Judges is that the violence that Israel embraced so eagerly in the first chapters of this book, runs its destructive path right through the book and, in the end, right through the heart of Israel itself, tearing it apart. Violence not only begets violence, Judges is saying. Violence is a horror that, once loosed, cannot be controlled or steered into the precise, but entirely imaginary paths we have plotted in our minds and our theories that are so completely detached from reality.

Andrew Bacevic is a respected American academic,

Like the Danites, after the slaughter of the people of Laish, "set up an idol for themselves" (v.30), the Americans and Europeans are eagerly building altars for their idols of war and false gods of capitalism.

one of the sane voices to listen to when it comes to America's wars and, in the case of this current US/NATO/European war, one of the very few. A retired colonel in the American armed forces, he was once a commander in the war on Iraq. I learned much from him about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and why so much has gone so wrong. His colleague, General Frankie Thomas, coined a most memorable phrase about the Iraq war: "America's catastrophic success," he called it.

On Amy Goodman's *Democracy Now!* I listened to Andrew Bacevic. Even he sometimes gets tripped up in the propagandistic tsunami Western media have become. He allowed Amy Goodman to trap him with a request to speak about the "particular brutality" of Russia's war against Ukraine. And he did, for quite some time. He is not wrong. What is going on is a serious breach of international law, and there probably are war crimes being committed with every new

onslaught. President Putin knows it. But then, taking me a bit by surprise, he gave the reason for “Russia’s brutality.” The war might have been thrust upon Russia by NATO’s irresponsible urges for expansion; however, Russia, he says, should have known better how to use “controlled violence.” Any modern army should have that capacity, Bacevic argues. “Controlled violence” in a war is how “professional armies” do their business.

Let us make no mistake: that war in Ukraine is brutal. But what war isn’t? Why do we allow ourselves to think of one war as less or more brutal than the other? Every war, without exception, is unspeakably brutal. The weapons now deployed are weapons made for total destruction. One painful lesson from the Vietnam War, and the never-ending wars of the last 30 years is, there is no such thing as “precise” targeting, or “surgical strikes.” We now know of the hundreds of drone strikes that were supposed to be “targeted,” but ended up striking schools and hospitals, killing children on the playground, civilians in the streets, and couples and their families and friends at wedding parties. That is why our theological insistence on looking at the world and our realities through the eyes of those who suffer, the victims and the excluded, is so crucial. And why is the brutality of the war in Ukraine such a hot topic of discussion, when the brutality of the war in Yemen, and the U.S. naval blockade of that impoverished country, for example, never was, and still is not worth a mention in Western media?

Andrew Bacevic knows that too, and tells us so, when he finally came to acknowledge that Americans have nothing to crow about and very little reason to shout indignantly at Russia. Recalling the devastation wreaked upon Iraq in America’s “shock and awe” war strategies in Iraq and Afghanistan, “Americans ought to a bit more humble,” he says.

I am not really one for splitting hairs, but that American humility really needs to be much more than just “a bit.” The wars against Iraq and Afghanistan wrought terrible destruction of infrastructure, of water supplies, of oil fields, of civilians, almost one million by last count. I shall not even speak of the destruction of a civilization thousands of years old, and of the treasures that Americans stole from those ruins to sell at home to others. The wars against Yemen, Sudan and other African countries are no less so.

Why is there this constant self-deception and foolishness about war and violence – that we can control it once we unleash it, that we can determine that its path to the “targets” is always true and straight? That

we can control the power of violence over the minds of those who use it, how much they come to love it, become enslaved to it, how ultimately they come to worship it? Have we not seen how quickly the violence we think we can use as a “tool” becomes a god we cannot live without? To say nothing of how it makes us feel and act like gods ourselves once we taste the power of snuffing out a human life, whether from a meter away and chopping off a head, or from thousands of miles away pressing a button on a computer?

How quickly did the carefully chosen words about violence George Bush spoke so fervently, and religiously in America’s post-9/11 evangelistic fervor, (remember the “crusade”?) turn into the violence of aggression in Abu Graib and Guantanamo Bay prisons, but not before turning those soldiers and torturers into the monsters Bush and the American media painted the Iraqis to be. But as surely, however: How soon did the words of our war songs beset and turn and poison the minds of our young people who invented the “necklace” as supreme form of punishment of informers

Have we not seen how quickly the violence we think we can use as a “tool” becomes a god we cannot live without? To say nothing of how it makes us feel and act like gods ourselves once we taste the power of snuffing out a human life, whether from a meter away and chopping off a head, or from thousands of miles away pressing a button on a computer?

for apartheid? Did we ever stop to wonder about our fiery rhetoric about “rivers of blood” as we saw them shedding their innocence forever while dancing around bodies burning to death in flames churned up by petrol poured by young black hands on other black bodies? Freedom songs turned into war songs turned into death songs?

Day-by-day, all of this strengthens my resolve to stand up against war and every form of violence, and for peace; to shout the message of the Book of Judges from the rooftops. There is no end to the lessons South Africa and the world can learn from this book. ■

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness

By Alex Patico

The Case for Life

Christian theology holds that each person is made in the image of God; as in Matthew 25, where Jesus says, “*I was a stranger and you took me in... whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me.*”

But, even if you have a different faith, or no faith, a peaceful society still requires a collective commitment to treat other human beings as of value — regardless of their station, character or net worth. Without such an understanding, individual self-interest can motivate people to cancel others, through violence and other forms of abuse.

It seems to me that this must be pretty absolute, if we are to avoid the slippery slope of picking-and-choosing which lives to preserve. Capital punishment is an affront to the principle of respect or reverence for life. Euthanasia, however well-meaning, too, must be seen as overstepping that limit. Violence and killing in war cannot be made benign merely on the basis of defense of others, a righteous cause or self-defense.

Clearly, this valuing of life is the cornerstone of opposition to terminating a pregnancy. Most who oppose such a procedure believe that a human person resides in the womb. If one believes that, one’s position against abortion is inevitable and inescapable.

This is what is known as the “consistent life” position. Anyone who declares themselves “pro-life” must be made to grapple with a charge of inconsistency or hypocrisy, if they accept killing in one area and reject it in another. We cannot turn a blind eye to trans teens contemplating suicide, addicts dying from overdoses or families on the edge of malnutrition and starvation — all of these involve potential avoidable loss of life, and life is precious.

The Case for Liberty

Our Constitution is an evolving instrument. It began as a means of establishing a structure of governance, a set of roles and processes, the shape of a nation. As the document developed — especially with addition of the Bill of Rights — it morphed into also being a statement about human freedom and autonomy. (Whether it will continue to expand its charge on behalf of the

people remains to be seen.)

In my view, it is unnecessary to speak of a “right to privacy” — I think it’s all liberty and it’s all limited. I am free to extend my own arm to reach for a book or for a shot of whiskey. But my freedom stops when my fist collides with someone else’s jaw. I am free to move from one town to the next, but not if it is to avoid prosecution for a crime. I am free to retreat into my own home, but I am not free to abuse a child there — even my own offspring. I am free to speak my mind, but not to shout “fire!” in a crowded theater, when I know there is no fire.

Starting with this fundamental observation — that rights exist and that they have limits—how must we

We cannot turn a blind eye to trans teens contemplating suicide, addicts dying from overdoses or families on the edge of malnutrition and starvation — all of these involve potential avoidable loss of life, and life is precious.

approach the special case of aborting a pregnancy?

Abortion does not occur in a vacuum. It is tied up with multiple moral, social and political values. First and foremost is the fact that there is an imbalance in, as they say, “whose ox is gored.” A woman will bear the discomfort, disruption and pain of pregnancy and childbirth. She will typically bear the lioness’ share of nurturing and caring for the infant or child. She may have her career altered or put on hold in deference to her parental responsibilities, even if some of them are shared with a spouse or partner.

Second, there are few circumstances that limit our personal freedom as much as assuming responsibility for a child. It is almost axiomatic to say, “Your life will never be the same,” after having a son or daughter. It has been described as “spending the rest of your life with your heart outside your chest.” And, we know, this responsibility — even in 2022 — does not fall

equally on the father and the mother, the granddad and the grandma.

Third, childbirth and child-rearing have enormous impacts on financial stability, employment and social networking. Poverty or prosperity are strongly linked to family size and the spacing of births. The cost of bringing a child from birth to age 18 is estimated to average \$267,000.

Fourth, one's body is, in a sense, one's last bastion of self-determination. Torturers know that if you control the body, you can likely control the mind. It is the exceptional person who can be psychologically free when their physical self is in irons or under duress.

Lastly, any of us who are old enough to remember what pre-Roe America was like know that abortions will be done, whether the law permits them or not. The maternal health and life that may be lost when a back-alley procedure goes south are every bit as precious as that of the fetus that was the subject of that procedure.

The Case for the Pursuit of Happiness

So, we have a problem. No one is going to be satisfied until we find a real resolution of this issue. The yawning chasm between pro- and anti- is growing ever deeper. Dialogue must rest on a base of mutual respect. Those opposed to abortion cannot be unmindful of the very real concerns of advocates on the other side. Those who favor having abortion available as an option cannot continue to dismiss "life" as nothing but a red herring.

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A few things seem obvious to me: that women must be a large part of the conversation; too often, those trying to settle the matter are all of the male gender; that the best minds of our society need to be consulted, including scientists, ethicists, faith leaders and social workers; and that our government (including the high Court) needs to recognize the tension between Life and Liberty that lies at the core of our Constitution and its exegesis.

The above may have made no one happy; but maybe that's a good sign because where we are now is unsustainable. ■

Alex Patico is an Orthodox Christian who served in the Peace Corps in Iran and was co-founder of the National Iranian-American Council. He is an international educator with the Institute of International Education, coordinated North American programs for the Orthodox Peace Fellowship, and has served on boards of Churches for Middle East Peace as well as the National Religious Coalition Against Torture. He lives with his wife, Elaine, in Columbia, Maryland.

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Proclaim Debt Amnesty Throughout All the Land? A Biblical Solution to a Present-day Problem

By Eva von Dassow

Student loan debt is one of the most burdensome forms of debt in America today. According to oft-cited statistics, approximately 43 million Americans have student loan debt, cumulatively amounting to around US\$1.7 trillion. The exorbitant costs of higher education in the United States, combined with the fact that educational credentials serve as a ticket to decent employment, require many students to take out loans that follow them long past graduation – and that are almost impossible to discharge in bankruptcy.

Hence, calls for cancellation of student loan debt by legislative or executive action keep intensifying, and President Joe Biden is expected to respond by ordering cancellation of some amount, notwithstanding arguments against any blanket debt amnesty.

Yet this very policy is inscribed on the U.S. Liberty Bell. “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof!” it declares, quoting the biblical Book of Leviticus, 25:10. The Hebrew word translated “liberty,” “*derōr*,” actually refers to debt amnesty.

In the world of the Bible, it was customary to cancel all noncommercial debts from time to time. As a scholar of the ancient Near East, I’ve read many cuneiform tablets that record how people then – like Americans today – often went into debt to meet living expenses. They might mortgage their property to keep a roof over their heads, only to find that ever-accruing interest made it impossible to pay off the principal.

They faced the additional risk of debt bondage: People lacking sufficient property to secure their debts would have to pledge their dependents or even their own selves to their creditors. Their creditors thus became their masters, and those pledged for debt were effectively enslaved, unless and until they were redeemed. A decree of debt amnesty would wipe the slate clean, springing people from bondage and restoring their freedom as well as their fortunes.

Kings clean the slate

The earliest recorded instances of this practice come from ancient Sumer, a land in the south of what is now Iraq. Urukagina, ruler of the city of Lagash around 2400 B.C., decreed a debt amnesty soon after he came

to power, releasing people living in debt bondage to go home and even clearing the prisons. In the Sumerian language, this amnesty was termed “*amargi*” – “return to mother” – for it restored people to their families.

Urukagina was not the first to issue such a decree, and it may already have become traditional by his time. The practice of decreeing debt amnesty is widely documented in the Semitic-speaking kingdoms of Syria and Mesopotamia during the early second millennium B.C. Debt amnesty was routinely triggered by the death of a ruler: His successor would raise a golden torch and decree “*andurāru*,” or “restoration” – the

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Akkadian equivalent of Hebrew “*deror*.” The stated purpose of such decrees was to establish or reestablish equity. A king’s foremost duty was to maintain “justice and equity,” as Hammurabi of Babylon claimed to do when promulgating his laws around 1750 B.C.

While lending at interest was not considered unjust, debt that deprived families of their property and liberty created inequity, which had to be remedied. A decree of “*andurāru*” restored equity, liberty and family property by canceling debts incurred for subsistence – including tax arrears owed to the state – while leaving commercial debts untouched. When Hammurabi was on his deathbed, his son Samsu-iluna took power and issued a decree remitting noncommercial debts, canceling arrears and forbidding their collection; thus, he declared, “I have established restoration throughout the land.”

A decree of restoration could also be issued to address political or economic crisis. The usurper or conqueror, having subjected a people to his rule, could establish their “restoration,” both remitting debts and enabling those captured during hostilities to go free. Hammurabi himself did this upon conquering the kingdom of Larsa, which was part of ancient Sumer.

Thus the conqueror could pose as a liberator setting a disordered realm to rights. The idea was to restore the inhabitants of the land to their original condition, before incurring debt, losing their property or losing their liberty.

Not so forgiving

The issuance of debt-canceling decrees was sporadic, not periodic, so one never knew when it would occur. But everyone knew it would happen sooner or later. Financiers would therefore prepare for this eventuality to avoid taking losses whenever debts were abruptly remitted and their collection prohibited. They used various methods to insulate transactions and investments from debt remission – because otherwise who would ever offer credit to those in need?

They developed legal fictions to disguise mortgage loans, debt bondage, and the like as contracts of other kinds, avoiding their cancellation by decree. The decree of Ammi-šaduqa, a king of Babylon in the 17th century B.C., explicitly prohibits such subterfuge, but regulation was a step behind entrepreneurs. Clever financial instruments immunized debt from amnesty and kept credit, as well as profit, flowing.

Ultimately a program for periodic debt cancellation was developed in biblical law. The Book of Deuteronomy requires remission of debts among Israelites every seventh year, using the term “*šemiṭṭah*” – “remission” – and stipulating that every creditor should remit the debt owed him. The Book of Leviticus adds the requirement to proclaim amnesty, Hebrew “*deror*,” after every seventh cycle of seven years, restoring every Israelite to his property and family in the 50th year – the jubilee year. Recognizing that a predictable debt amnesty would only make creditors’ planning easier, *Deuteronomy 15:9* warns against refusing to lend as the seventh year approaches.

The biblical authors must have had some experience with creditors’ efforts to evade the requirement to remit debts. According to the Book of Jeremiah, when Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, decreed “*deror*” in

the face of the Babylonian invasion of 587 B.C., creditors agreed to release their enslaved fellow Judeans, then found ways to force them back into bondage.

Not only was the ostensible purpose of debt-remission decrees defeated by creative credit instruments, the true purpose of such decrees was not to fix the problems that made them necessary. People would still need to go into debt to survive, pay their taxes and keep a roof over their heads. They would still risk impoverishment, debt bondage and eventual enslavement. Sporadic debt cancellation did not eliminate chronic indebtedness, nor was it meant to.

Instead, the function of such decrees was to restore socioeconomic balance – and the tax base – enough that the cycle of borrowing to survive could start over. In a sense, debt amnesty actually served to restore society to its ideal state of inequity, so that it would always need the same remedy again.

This dynamic is worth considering amid calls for canceling student loan debt. Certainly a student debt amnesty would benefit millions whose lives are shack-

As long as higher education is treated simultaneously as a private good and a job requirement, people will still need to go into debt to get degrees. Then the same remedy will have to be applied again.

led by interest on loans they took out in the hope that a degree would guarantee them gainful employment. It would do nothing to address the problems that make incurring such debt necessary.

As long as higher education is treated simultaneously as a private good and a job requirement, people will still need to go into debt to get degrees. Then the same remedy will have to be applied again. ■

Eva von Dassow is Associate professor of Ancient History at the University of Minnesota. This article was first published in The Conversation on July 26, 2022 and is reprinted here with permission.

Alito's Anxiety

By Brian Kaylor and Beau Underwood

During remarks last month in Rome delivered at a religious liberty event hosted by the University of Notre Dame Law School, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito issued an ominous warning: “There’s growing hostility to religion or at least the traditional religious beliefs that are contrary to the new moral code that is ascendant in some sectors.”

In Alito’s thinking, this animosity has sparked a “battle to protect religious freedom in an increasingly secular society.” He added his concern that our “stable and successful society in which people of diverse faiths live and work together harmoniously and productivity while still retaining their own beliefs” is under threat. Channeling Richard John Neuhaus, the justice cautioned against a privatizing of religious belief and practice where the cultural expectation is that “when you step outside into the public square in the light of day you had better behave yourself like a good secular citizen.”

Given these cultural shifts, Alito argued that “the challenge for those wanting to protect religious liberty in the United States, Europe, and other similar places is to convince people who are not religious that religious liberty is worth special protection, and that will not be easy to do.”

While Alito is right to worry about the erosion of religious liberty, his speech misdiagnosed the problem. Although he referenced multiple faith traditions, he revealed his real concern to be opposition to “traditional religious beliefs” by those subscribing to “the new moral code.” This depiction sets up an antagonism between supposedly secular progressive ideas and conservative religious understandings, with the latter needing special protection from the law and the government.

Additionally, he suggested only religious people care about or need religious liberty — as if secular people don’t have such First Amendment rights. And this framing of secularism as the enemy of religious liberty glosses over religious persecution done by religious people. Yet, he argued, “It is hard to convince people that religious liberty is worth defending if they don’t think that religion is a good thing that deserves protection.”

This mindset contradicts the historic understanding and practice of religious liberty in the United States.

Ironically, conceptualizing religious liberty in this way actually undermines the protection it offers. Rather than bolstering the rights of all, Alito wants to redefine religious liberty as carving out special exemptions for some.

In this edition of *A Public Witness*, we interrogate the encroaching secularism Alito fears. Then we cross-examine recent Supreme Court rulings to identify how Alito’s logic is already at work. Finally, we appeal the verdict rendered by some in the media that Alito and other justices are taking the high court in a “pro-religion” direction.

Secularism Isn’t So Scary

Ironically, conceptualizing religious liberty in this way actually undermines the protection it offers. Rather than bolstering the rights of all, Alito wants to redefine religious liberty as carving out special exemptions for some.

There’s no dispute that American society is becoming more secular. One way to see this is looking at religious identification. A Pew Research Center poll last December found that 29% of Americans are religiously unaffiliated, constituting a category referred to as the “nones.” Alito specifically referred to this group, claiming it “is a challenge” to convince the nones that religious liberty is important.

Ryan Burge, a Baptist pastor and political scientist, explained in his book examining this group that the nones have become “statistically the same size as the largest religious groups in the United States.” Yet, he cautions against depicting members of the “nones” as hostile to religion. The vast majority of those in the category identify as “nothing in particular,” which reflects a relative indifference towards religion. As Burge wrote, “These are people that just don’t feel strongly about religion one way or the other.”

These statistical trends provide support to the argu-

ment made by the philosopher Charles Taylor in his 2007 tome *A Secular Age*. He unpacked “the shift to secularity” as involving “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.” Alito seems to be wrestling with this new reality, interpreting it to imply an inherent conflict between those subscribing to religious and secular worldviews.

In their study of secularism’s political effects, political scientists David Campbell, Geoffrey Layman, and John Green offered superficial support of this worry. Their book *Secular Surge* documents how this new religious-secular divide is associated with the widening political polarization. Looking at political party elites, they found religious belief to be more salient to Republican leaders and secularist thinking more common among Democrats. Our political fights increasingly reflect this difference in thinking.

Yet, there is much more to the story. There remains strong diversity within each political party. For example, the Democratic coalition includes both secular-minded voters and many African Americans who are fervently religious. And there is great diversity within the secular category (i.e. atheists are different from agnostics who are different from the nones), which prevents secularists, at least thus far, from forming a strong sense of social identity. Creating the “Secular Left” requires greater ideological coherence and organization than currently exists.

Whatever the reality, there’s another reason to be suspicious of Alito’s fears of a rising secularism hollowing out religious liberty: the Constitution itself. Deriving the government’s authority from the consent of the governed and aware of the (potentially violent) discord that arises from conflicting religious passions, those who drafted the authorizing document of the United States rooted its ideas in a secular foundation that protected rights of religious practice.

“[The Founding Fathers] quite deliberately created a secular government through the establishment clause while enshrining an individual right to religious liberty through the free exercise clause... To them, secularism was not a menace to religion, but a crucial component of it: History taught them that once the government got involved with matters of faith, it harmed both church and state.” Dahlia Lithwick and Mark Joseph Stern wrote for *Slate* in a piece critical of Alito’s remarks.

Unfortunately, recent rulings by the Supreme Court demonstrate that a majority of the justices have forgotten this crucial lesson.

Privileging Religion

With a Republican dominance taking hold of the Supreme Court, a string of recent rulings reinterpreted the religion clauses of the First Amendment. Collectively, these cases effectively diminish the role of the Establishment Clause. Two examples from the court’s last term illuminate this shift.

First, a 6-3 ruling in *Carson v. Makin* ordered Maine to spend taxpayer money intended for public education on sectarian schools. With some rural parts of Maine lacking the resources to sustain public secondary schools of their own, families could use taxpayer resources for their children to attend alternative schools, public and private. For decades, Maine had barred schools that proselytize from receiving these funds not because of religious animus but to respect church-state separation.

Writing for the Court’s majority (which included Alito), Chief Justice John Roberts reasoned that this practice constituted “discrimination against religion. A state’s antiestablishment interest does not justify enact-

With the Carson ruling, she added, “The court leads us to a place where separation of church and state becomes a constitutional violation.”

ments that exclude some members of the community from an otherwise generally available public benefit because of their religious exercise.”

Justice Sonia Sotomayor noted in her dissenting opinion also signed by that Justices Stephen Breyer and Elena Kagan that “in just a few years, the Court has upended constitutional doctrine, shifting from a rule that permits states to decline to fund religious organizations to one that requires states in many circumstances to subsidize religious indoctrination with taxpayer dollars.” With the Carson ruling, she added, “The court leads us to a place where separation of church and state becomes a constitutional violation.”

Six days later, the same 6-3 split ruled in *Kennedy v. Bremerton* for a football coach leading students in audible, public prayers while on the job on school property. Ignoring the inherently coercive nature of such practices that violate both the Establishment Clause and the free exercise rights of students and players, the justices in the majority prioritized the claims made by a school official who exercised power over students and was paid by public tax dollars. To

justify this ruling, Justice Neil Gorsuch wrote in the majority opinion that Alito signed onto:

“The only meaningful justification the government offered for its reprisal rested on a mistaken view that it had a duty to ferret out and suppress religious observances even as it allows comparable secular speech.”

Justices Sotomayor, Breyer, and Kagan again dissented.

“[This] decision is particularly misguided because it elevates the religious rights of a school official, who voluntarily accepted public employment and the limits that public employment entails, over those of his students, who are required to attend school and who this court has long recognized are particularly vulnerable and deserving of protection,” Sotomayor argued in response to the majority’s ruling. “In doing so, the court sets us further down a perilous path in forcing states to entangle themselves with religion, with all of our rights hanging in the balance. As much as the court protests otherwise, today’s decision is no victory for religious liberty.”

These two cases operate according to the logic of Alito’s speech in Rome. A rising secularism is aggressively marginalizing religion. The court must serve as a bulwark against violations of religious liberty. The problem with this tale is that it’s not true.

Fake News

A narrative emerged in recent media reports around these cases that the Supreme Court is increasingly “pro-religion.” These arguments not only misconstrued the substance of the decisions but served as an accomplice to the court’s majority in misrepresenting religion as synonymous merely with a slice of conservative Christianity.

The Carson ruling led a *New York Times* writer to declare it came from “a pro-religion court,” adding that “the rise of the religious right has made religious freedom a political priority for Republicans.” But neither statement is true. After all, this suggests the three dissenting justices — Breyer, Kagan, and Sotomayor — are anti-religion for opposing the majority’s opinion. In reality, those justices argued that true religious liberty requires a robust separation of church and state.

Additionally, a quick look at some of the organizations who filed an amicus brief supporting Maine’s position in Carson shows the absurdity of the “pro-religion” logic. Among those urging the ruling that the dissenting justices offered: Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, Catholics for Choice, Central Conference of American Rabbis, Evangelical Lutheran

Church in America, General Synod of the United Church of Christ, Hindu American Foundation, Methodist Federation for Social Action, National Council of Jewish Women, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, Sikh Coalition, and others. A ruling that rejects the perspectives of those groups cannot in good faith be called “pro-religion” unless religion is defined in such a narrow way that these explicitly religious groups are excluded.

But some still rushed to christen the court’s majority as the guardians of religion. For instance, Nina Totenberg of NPR claimed the *Kennedy v. Bremerton* ruling proved that “the current court is the most pro-religion of any court in nearly 70 years.”

Such an assertion is even more offensive in this case than in Carson, as multiple briefs came from clergy and faith groups urging the justices not to push official prayers in public schools. One brief included the American Jewish Committee, Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and General Synod of the United Church

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of Christ. Another brief came from retired military chaplains who care not only about religion but also the religious liberty rights of everyone. Yet another brief came from clergy — including Baptist, Episcopalian, Jewish, Lutheran, and Methodist ministers — in the community where the case emerged as they backed their public school instead of coercive prayer. And other briefs came from church-state scholars, members of Congress, and other experts who are religious.

To the suggestion that a ruling that went against all of those ministers and religious groups was “pro-religion,” there’s no better response than the classic line from *A Princess Bride*: “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

The news reports suggesting a “pro-religion” court draw on a recent study showing the court does rule more frequently for religious organizations than in the past. And while the authors of the study, Lee Epstein

and Eric A. Posner, use the “pro-religion” language, they also offer important nuance to explain the shift that is overlooked by the media reports citing their research: “In most of these cases, the winning religion was a mainstream Christian organization, whereas in the past pro-religion outcomes more frequently favored minority or marginal religious organizations.”

It’s true that conservative Christians fare well with the current majority. But many such victories come at the expense of other Christians and those of other faiths or no faith. The Supreme Court isn’t increasingly pro-religion but instead increasingly antagonistic toward concerns about religious establishment. That means they aren’t promoting religion or religious liberty; they’re moving us closer toward Christian Nationalism where one faith gains civic privileges not afforded to those with other beliefs.

Such an approach to church-state issues isn’t pro-religion but actually harms religious believers. As John Leland, an influential Baptist minister during the founding era, argued: “Never promote men who seek after a state-established religion; it is spiritual tyranny — the worst of despotism. It is turnpiking the way to heaven by human law, in order to establish ministerial gates to collect toll. It converts religion into a principle of state policy, and the gospel into merchandise.”

That’s why Amanda Tyler of the Baptist Joint Committee, noted these recent Supreme Court rulings and declared to applause at the general assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in Dallas, Texas, on June 30: “Christian Nationalism is the single biggest threat to religious freedom as we know it today.” It’s bad enough that six justices on the nation’s highest court don’t understand that reality, but it’s even worse when commentators also cast religious liberty advocates as anti-religion.

Towards the beginning of his speech delivered in Rome, Alito suggested that “religious liberty is under attack in many places because it is dangerous to those who want to hold complete power. It also probably grows out of something dark and deep in the human DNA: a tendency to distrust and dislike people who are not like ourselves.”

The justice’s fears about secularism combined with these two recent rulings by the high court leave us wondering whether Alito has reflected on his own counsel. Rather than affording the consciences of all

Americans — religious or secular — the same protections, the court seeks to advantage some perspectives and practices over others. In tearing down the Establishment Clause, the court seems to distrust and dislike Americans who don’t adhere to the majority’s restrictive understanding of what constitutes religion.

Alito and the other justices in the majority believe they are doing religion a favor. In reality, such privilege ends up alienating people who feel (conservative) Christianity is being advantaged in a way that compromises the consciences of others. Alito doesn’t understand that his militant distortion of religious liberty will actually strengthen secularism. That’s a tragedy for both the church and the state.

As a public witness, ■

Brian Kaylor is President & Editor-in-Chief of Word&Way is a Baptist minister with Ph.D. in political communication. Beau Underwood is a pastor in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), a senior edi-

“Never promote men who seek after a state-established religion; it is spiritual tyranny — the worst of despotism. It is turnpiking the way to heaven by human law, in order to establish ministerial gates to collect toll. It converts religion into a principle of state policy, and the gospel into merchandise.” ...John Leland

tor with Word&Way, and a doctoral student in public affairs at Mizzou.

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Reckoning with Re-education: Christianity's Role in Native American Boarding Schools

By Mark Lambert

Image, made available by the Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, shows students at a Presbyterian boarding school in Sitka, Alaska in the summer of 1883.



Last month the United States Department of the Interior published the first volume of the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report. The report confirms, in shocking detail, the US Government's deployment of boarding schools as a tool to culturally assimilate American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children and to facilitate Indian territorial dispossession. More than four hundred of these institutions are documented, in operation between 1819 and 1969.

Perhaps most disturbingly, the report also identifies 53 burial sites for children across the Federal Indian boarding school system—with more expected to be discovered.

The Initiative, pushed by Secretary Deb Haaland,

was prompted by the mass discovery of unmarked graves by Canada's *Tk'emlúps te Secwepemc* First Nation at the Kamloops Indian Residential School. The report contains the first official list of US Federal Indian boarding schools, accompanied by detailed summaries of each school. According to the report, these boarding schools:

"...deployed systematic militarized and identity-alteration methodologies to attempt to assimilate American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian children through education, including but not limited to the following: (1) renaming Indian children from Indian to English names; (2) cutting hair of Indian children; (3) discouraging or preventing the use of

American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian languages, religions, and cultural practices; and (4) organizing Indian and Native Hawaiian children into units to perform military drills.”

The report also identifies the frequent use of manual labor and corporal punishment, including flogging, withholding food, and solitary confinement. The Initiative intends to address the intergenerational trauma caused by these institutions. As Secretary Haaland notes,

“We continue to see the evidence of this attempt to forcibly assimilate Indigenous people in the disparities that communities face. It is my priority to not only give voice to the survivors and descendants of federal Indian boarding school policies, but also to address the lasting legacies of these policies so Indigenous peoples can continue to grow and heal.”

Regarding the American colonizer’s approach to Indigenous people, cultural assimilation and conversion to Christianity were effectively synonymous concepts—the point was the erasure of Indigenous culture and with it, any resistance to territorial dispossession. I find it striking that this report, produced by a federal agency, attempts to critically—albeit carefully—unravel the role of religion in this chapter of American history.

The 1908 Supreme Court case *Quick Bear v. Leupp* is singled out, which effectively ruled that the Federal government could freely use funds from Tribal treaty or trust fund accounts to compel children to attend boarding schools operated by religious organizations. In other words, “the Court held that the prohibition on the Federal Government to spend funds on religious schools did not apply to Indian treaty funds... and to forbid such expenditures would violate the free exercise clause of the First Amendment.” Religious institutions are omnipresent actors throughout the report, specifically Christian organizations, and denominations.

The historical role of Christianity in Federal Indian boarding schools is thus one in which the “separation of church and state” simply didn’t apply. To their credit, the investigators do not shy away from this fact, noting, “the United States at times paid religious institutions and organizations on a per capita basis for Indian children to enter Federal Indian boarding schools operated by religious institutions or organizations.” The US Government provided many of these religious groups with tracts of Indian reservation lands and accepted the recommendations of these religious bodies for presidential appointed government posts—

all in what the Department deemed “an unprecedented delegation of power by the Federal Government to church bodies.” Notably, this delegation of power was undertaken without any centralized, interdenominational oversight of these religious organizations.

As one example of this close relationship, the Department of the Interior points to the Hilo Boarding School for Native Hawaiian male children, which was founded in 1836 by Calvinist missionaries, received federal funding, and operated as a feeder school for Lahainaluna Seminary. This Seminary then trained Native Hawaiians to convert other Native Hawaiians to Christianity and suppress the Native Hawaiian language (‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i).

My initial interest in the report was pertaining to connections with the history of leprosy in Hawaii, which disproportionately affected the Native Hawaiian population. In cases of suspected leprosy, the 1865 Act of Isolation allowed for the separation of children (including infants) from parents and the relationship between this act and the boarding school system

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remains a pressing question. The Department does acknowledge the rampant spread of disease throughout Federal Indian boarding schools coupled with the appalling lack of health care. This lack of health care was compounded by the 1883 Religious Crimes Code which explicitly banned the practice of Indigenous ceremonies, including traditional healing methodologies. Curiously, the report does not note this connection or the long-reaching consequences of the 1883 Code, even though Rule Six of that Code warns:

The influence or practice of a so-called “medicine-man” operates as a hindrance to the civilization of a tribe, or that said “medicine-man” resorts to any artifice or device to keep the Indians under his influence or shall adopt any means to prevent the attendance of children at the agency schools.

Indigenous healers and healing practices were viewed as not only an obstacle to the adoption of Christianity but also as an active threat to the board-

ing school system. These policies were not overturned until the 1934 Wheeler Howard Act and 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act, but the damage to the health of generations of Native communities was already done. The report does point to (and endorse) the NIH-funded Running Bear studies—quantitative medical studies examining the relationship between American Indian boarding school child attendance and physical health status. One of a series of recommendations for moving forward includes the further promotion of Indian health research on the health impacts of the boarding school system.

The Department of the Interior has already launched “The Road to Healing,” a year-long cross-country tour intended “to allow American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian survivors of the federal Indian boarding school system the opportunity to share their stories, help connect communities with trauma-informed support, and facilitate collection of a permanent oral history.”

The report names a few religious organizations who were involved in the boarding school system: the American Missionary Association of the Congregational Church, the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church, the Board of Home Missions of the Presbyterian Church, the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, and the Protestant Episcopal Church. There’s now a pressing need for denominations and religious organizations across the US to conduct a transparent examination of their histories and share key records with the Initiative—particularly since such transparency can aid in the further identification of children at these schools.

In addition to transparency about the past, religious groups can work for education and healing in the present. Between 2008 and 2015, Canada organized a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to allow those affected by Indian residential schools to share their stories. Christian organizations, in conjunction with the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, are calling for something similar in the United States. The “Truth and Healing Commission on Indian Boarding School Policies in the United States Act” has already been introduced in Congress, and this Commission has been endorsed by the Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Franciscan Action Network, Friends Committee on National Legislation, the United Methodist Church, Christian Reformed Church of North America, and the Jesuit Conference Office of Justice and Ecology. Some Protestant denominations, such as the Christian

Church (Disciples of Christ) have recently established their own Truth and Healing Councils, even calling for a critical examination of affiliate educational institutions.

Pope Francis recently apologized for the horrendous abuse exacted by the Canadian residential schools, now apologies are needed on behalf of those who suffered within our own borders. The painful task of reckoning with our nation’s history and our religious organizations’ complicity in injustice is a necessary first step to begin addressing intergenerational trauma. Maka Black Elk, executive director of truth and healing for Red Cloud Indian School on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, notes that Pope Francis “did something really important, which is name the importance of being indignant at this history.” Surely other religious institutions and organizations can follow suit regarding this unequivocally violent and damaging history. ■

Mark M. Lambert (PhD ’21) is a postdoctoral Teaching

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Fellow at the University of Chicago Divinity School and the College. His research focuses on the historical role of religion in shaping public health approaches to leprosy, especially in 19th century Molokai, Hawaii. In the upcoming winter quarter he will be teaching the undergraduate course “Indigenous Religions, Health, and Healing” at the University of Chicago. This article was first published July 7, 2022 in Sightings, a publication of the Martin Marty Center for the Public Understanding of Religion at the University of Chicago Divinity School, and is reprinted here with permission.

A Tale of Two Ordinations

Marion D. Aldridge

Recently, the Reverend Doctor Randy Wright, one of my best friends and a person I admire as much as any pastor I know, celebrated the 50th anniversary of his ordination. I've heard of such remembrances in Roman Catholic churches where priests don't have wedding anniversaries to celebrate, but I'd never heard of this in a Baptist context.

One reason for the lack of such occasions is that, in some churches and denominations, ordination is no big deal. In Baptist life, a young person feels "called to preach," consults a pastor and proceeds through a more-or-less informal interview process with several seasoned pastors.

They ask questions about doctrines, beliefs, experiences and the "call." The "call," at a deep level and at its best, is a lifelong vocation to serve God in the "Gospel Ministry," a term which includes but is not limited to preaching.

People respond to a call into ministry for dozens of legitimate and illegitimate reasons. Some people want to make their momma happy. Some suppose they'd enjoy the celebrity status of standing in front of a congregation of hundreds (or thousands). Some react to a moment of spiritual insight or passion, and indulge in a long-range response to a short-term emotion. These pseudo-callings, ordinarily, don't go well. In a sermon celebrating the 50th anniversary of his ordination, Randy said, "It didn't take long to realize ordination is not some divine personal protective equipment."

Fiftieth anniversaries of ordinations into the Christian ministry are also rare because there are hundreds of distractions, temptations and detours along the way. The Big Three are sex, money and power. Of course, there's no shame in leaving the ministry and selling insurance or teaching high school. Those can be vocations; but they don't require ordination by a Christian church.

One of the first articles I ever published explored the question of de-frocking or dis-ordaining someone in the evangelical tradition. While it can be done, such a step is rare. Rare.

Randy had an exemplary 50 years of ministry. He was the pastor of two local churches for the majority of those decades, though he also served as a chaplain at the beginning and end of his ministry. Rather than pastoring a local congregation,

chaplains serve in an institutional setting, for example, a hospital, a prison or a retirement village.

Randy was ordained by the First Baptist Church of Spartanburg, South Carolina, while he was a seminarian. First Baptist was one of the biggest and most prestigious of South Carolina's "big steeple" churches. Their pastor was a tall, handsome, wise South African immigrant with a charming and distinguished brogue. Nothing was done in that congregation that was any less than excellent. First Baptist of Spartanburg was as high church as Southern Baptists were in the mid-20th century. Randy's certificate of ordination displays beautiful calligraphy, suitable for framing, signed by each man on the council after the examination. (The

In Baptist life, a young person feels "called to preach," consults a pastor and proceeds through a more-or-less informal interview process with several seasoned pastors.

examiners were all men in the 1970s.) I've seen it on the wall of Randy's study whenever I've visited him.

Contrast that with my ordination experience. Our blue-collar congregation was as "low church" as church could be. For example, we had never heard of Advent or Epiphany, but we celebrated Mother's Day and July Fourth enthusiastically. The pastor of my home church was a sincere good man and was better educated than many rural Baptist pastors in our area.

Preparation for the ordination inquiry lacked the gravitas one might expect. I had not yet attended seminary, and had only vague plans to do so. Employed by a fine Christian organization called Young Life, a non-denominational outreach to high school students, I was moving into a role working with young adults in a large downtown church, First Baptist of Columbia, South Carolina. Ordination was a credential required for my new job. Notice there is not one word of "calling" or "vocation" in this paragraph. I was as theologically clueless as could be, an uneducated evangelical. God help us all!

My preparation for the ordination council was primarily concerned with the trick questions some preachers were known to ask during the investigation: “If a person is converted on his death bed in a hospital, how would you baptize that new Christian by immersion?” I’m grateful my pastor shepherded the council and me through the process without any major snafus. A week later, I was ordained. My certificate of ordination, with all the relevant information typed in, has no signatures. It was never framed. I placed it in a folder in a filing cabinet. I didn’t remember the year or the date as time provided distance from the event. The primary result at that time, seemed to be I was legally allowed to officiate at weddings.

My ordination at Immanuel Baptist Church in North Augusta, South Carolina, made my mother and daddy proud; but, at the time, it meant little to me. On February 25, 1973, the ordained men present in Sunday morning worship (deacons and a few retired pastors, if memory serves), stood in line to place hands on my head or shoulders as I knelt in front of the congregation. They did this silently and reverently with a few whispered words of encouragement. This should have meant more to me than it did. I was young and ignorant, wet behind the ears; but I also blame a Baptist system that didn’t seem to take ordination seriously.

Some Baptist laity mistakenly believe only ordained ministers can serve the Lord’s Supper or perform baptisms; but that’s local custom and not Baptist theology. Some laity (and some ordained clergy, unfortunately) believe ordination is only about a “call to preach,” by which they mean preaching in a local church. I’ve had friends who became chaplains, or seminary professors, who received condolences from their childhood Sunday school teachers for “leaving the ministry.”

Roman Catholics endorse seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, eucharist (the Lord’s Supper or communion), reconciliation, anointing of the sick, matrimony, and holy order (ordination). Baptists are taught there are only two ordinances, the Lord’s Supper and baptism.

According to Baptist theology and tradition, these are the only two rituals approved by Jesus during his life and ministry on earth. The distinction is also made that these events are merely symbolic.

As a better-educated person nowadays, I understand the desire of early Baptists to put some distance between their doctrines and the transubstantiation theology of Catholics, who believe the bread and wine turn into the real body and actual blood of Jesus.

Over the years, I became tired of the word “merely” to limit what happens when God gets involved in the

Lord’s Supper, a baptism or an ordination. Nowadays, I pray that something more than meager human activity is going on. God’s sacred and holy presence makes a difference! I don’t believe the Almighty automatically overpowers human activity to make a mundane process (a ritual bath and a ritual meal) spiritual. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, and sometimes grape juice is just grape juice. Legendary Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon believed ordination consisted of putting empty hands on an empty head.

That’s our Baptist heritage, and my own ordination reflected this tradition. Randy, however, has, through the years, claimed a more robust theology of ordination. What transpired at his ordination was important enough for him to mark the date and to celebrate on its 25th and 50th anniversaries. Randy preached a sermon on the 50th anniversary of his ordination with the title, “A Long Obedience in the Same Direction.” Eugene Peterson authored a book with that title. The phrase is originally from the Frederick Nietzsche volume, *Beyond Good and Evil*. Nietzsche wrote, “The

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essential thing ‘in heaven and earth’ is ... that there should be a long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living.”

The rituals of the Christian church, Randy discovered before I did, have value in the long term. As we recently compared notes about our ordination experiences, I realized the biggest differences were in the two people being ordained and not in the ordaining churches, nor in the ordination councils, and not because his certificate had lavish calligraphy. Candidly, Randy was wiser than I was, sooner than I was.

Randy was attuned to the mystery of ordination earlier and better than I. Maybe Roman Catholics call this holy orders for good reason. The

sacredness of the event was alive and well even if I was merely seeking ministerial credentials. I've discovered a mystical component is inherent in all the rituals of the Baptist tradition, even if we call them ordinances rather than sacraments. God is working.

For some being immersed in the baptistery pool, the experience is like water off a duck's back.

For others, the event is transformative and life-changing. When I was a young pastor, our church in Louisville, Kentucky, scheduled a baptism for a recent adult convert. The weather was literally freezing and the water heater had broken, so the baptistery water was icy cold. I suggested we postpone the baptism. The lady being baptized rejected that idea. This baptism meant something to her. It was not a rite of passage for a 12-year old child to make mom and dad happy. What transpired was more than a mere symbol, and I remember the experience 40 years later. Something important and life-altering happened that day!

I've participated in baptism and ordination services over the years that have varied from "going through the motions," to "standing on holy ground." I've even changed the words of wedding ceremonies at which I officiate to acknowledge I am representing God rather than the state of South Carolina.

In understanding ordination, a rearview mirror view isn't particularly helpful. Who knows on the first day

I've discovered a mystical component is inherent in all the rituals of the Baptist tradition, even if we call them ordinances rather than sacraments. God is working.

of the freshman year of college which student will drop out and die an alcoholic at age 35, or which will discover a cure for cancer? Who knows if the individual being ordained will serve God magnificently or poorly, or not at all over the next 50 years?

At this point in our respective ministries, there's not much of a contrast in our theology of ordination. Like Randy, I've come to believe that ordination, and other ordinances (or sacraments) are at their best when the divine and the human work together. I do my part. God does God's part. That's worth celebrating. ■

Marion Aldridge is a writer. He studied English at Clemson University, served as pastor in several churches, retired as the leader of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of South Carolina. He lives with his wife, Sally, in Columbia, South Carolina.

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Book Review

CLAYPOOL edited by C. Douglas Weaver and Aaron Douglas Weaver. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2022., 256 pages.

Reviewed by William Powell Tuck

Without much debate, many consider John Claypool as one of the most prominent preachers in the South in the latter half of the 20th century. He was often called “the preachers’ preacher.” His “confessional preaching” style has been the subject of doctoral dissertations and his former Episcopal church published a collection of memories in a volume entitled *Life Is Gift*. The book, *Claypool*, might be called, the editors suggest, “a posthumous *Festschrift*.” Fourteen writers, pastors, professors, former church members and students, including Claypool’s son, reflect on Claypool as pastor, preacher, and professor. The book focuses on who Claypool was and what he accomplished and seeks to introduce him to those who do not know him. Throughout the book, central themes from Claypool’s life and preaching are noted such as “life is gift,” “the basis of hope,” “humility,” and “generosity.” John Rowan, Claypool’s son, initiated the desire to see this book become a reality to capture his father’s career.

Claypool is introduced by a biographical sketch of his life which focuses on his college and seminary years, his call to ministry, marriage, churches he served, and his struggle with the death of his daughter, Laura Lue, with leukemia, and his melee with his own woundedness. In a chapter entitled “A Claypool Bibliography,” Walter Shurden explores the 12 published books of Claypool and how they reveal his theological vision, major life themes and his approach to sermon making. Shurden also believes that Claypool’s books show something of the religious experiences that shaped his own spirituality. His first book, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, Shurden believes, revealed the framework of much of Claypool’s thinking, preaching and teaching that moved from “the darkest of events” to what he affirmed as “the basis of hope.” Shurden also notes that Claypool’s book, *Opening Blind Eyes*, has 60 pages that are autobiographical insights into the profoundly personal experience that shaped Claypool’s life.

The book relates Claypool’s success as a preacher in five churches but traces his administrative struggles,

his conflicts in some of his congregations over racism, gender equality, ordination of women deacons, civil rights issues, the Southern Baptist Convention controversy, the membership of Black people, and other issues. His congregations were gracious to allow him time away to speak at various colleges and universities, and to deliver major preaching lectures at schools like Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and the prestigious Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School, only the third Southern Baptist to deliver them. This latter lecture series was published in his book, *The Preaching Event*, and relates his method of “confessional preaching.”

The book relates Claypool’s success as a preacher in five churches but traces his administrative struggles, his conflicts in some of his congregations over racism, gender equality, ordination of women deacons, civil rights issues, the Southern Baptist Convention controversy, the membership of Black people, and other issues.

The book explores Claypool’s personal struggle with his own sense of unworthiness, vocational fatigue, burnout, and his state of exhaustion which he experienced that led him to resign as pastor of Northminister Baptist Church and seek a year of Clinical Pastoral Education in the Southern Baptist Hospital in New Orleans, Louisiana, for healing. His divorce, pilgrimage into the Episcopal Church, new marriage, and 14 years as rector at St Luke’s Episcopal Church in Birmingham, Alabama, are explored as well. An interesting read is noted in how he was almost not interviewed at St. Luke’s because of his age, divorce and not having been an Episcopal priest very long. His return to Baptist life by teaching preaching at Mercer University’s McAfee School of Theology is an inter-

esting climax to his lengthy career as a minister. The sermon, "View from the Second Row," by Claypool's son, John Rowan, is a moving piece that tells about his dad's time at Crescent Hill Baptist Church and gives a glimpse into the reason for his parent's divorce. The book concludes with an examination of Claypool's benediction which he used in all his churches. David Hull notes that it had a threefold focus-- the practice, the meaning and the echo. Claypool said the benediction was designed as an "interpretive framework around the pilgrimage of life."

The 12 chapters, foreword, and the epilogue are designed to guide us through the life and ministry of one of Christianity's noted preachers. The chapters are professionally written, easy to read, often genuinely personal, and presented without ignoring Claypool's weaknesses or personal struggles as well as noting his strengths and singular contributions as a preacher, pastor, teacher and fellow struggler on life's journey. For those wanting a gate into the lifeway of Claypool will find this book a genuine rich resource, and those who do not know him will find this book a stellar introduction to a minister who has much to teach those who will "listen." ■

William Powell Tuck is a retired Baptist pastor and seminary professor. He has been a contributor to Christian Ethics Today an many other journals. His

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book, Conversations with My Grandchildren about God, Religion, and Life esd reviewed by Fisher Humphreys in Issue 115 of Christian Ethics Today. He and his wife, Emily, live in Richmond, Virginia

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Richard Glossip Has Eaten Three Last Meals on Death Row. Years Later, the State Is Still Trying to Execute Him.

By Ziva Branstetter

In the parking lot outside the Oklahoma State Penitentiary, I stood on my toes in a throng of reporters, straining to hear death row inmate Richard Glossip's words through the speaker of a phone his friend held aloft.

It was 3:45 p.m. on Sept. 30, 2015, and Glossip should have been dead by now from a cocktail of lethal drugs pumped into his body.

I joined reporters, Glossip's family and supporters outside the prison in McAlester that day — a warm and breezy afternoon — as the condemned man was able to make a phone call from inside the maximum-security facility's death row. Glossip seemed relieved to be alive but, understandably, wondered why. He'd exhausted his last appeal and eaten his last meal: fish and chips, a Wendy's Baconator burger and a strawberry shake.

He learned his life was spared because of a technicality: One of the three drugs Oklahoma officials procured for the execution was the wrong one.

"That's just crazy," Glossip said over his friend's phone.

It was the third time the state of Oklahoma had tried to execute Glossip and the latest lapse in a macabre history of failure in its death penalty machinery. As a journalist who covered Oklahoma's prison system and death row for 25 years, I reported on many of those breakdowns.

Seven years later, the state remains intent on executing Glossip, scheduling its fourth attempt for Sept. 22 despite persistent claims that the 59-year-old is innocent and allegations that prosecutors ordered the destruction of vital evidence in the 1997 murder-for-hire case that resulted in his death sentence.

Glossip's claims of innocence have drawn an unusually bipartisan array of supporters, including 28 Republican state lawmakers, most of whom support the death penalty. The legislators commissioned an exhaustive review that recently turned up new information about prosecutors' alleged role in destroying evidence and financial records bringing into question Glossip's motive in the case. The lawmakers have called on the governor to order an independent review of Glossip's case and for a state appeals court to conduct a hearing

to examine the new evidence.

Calls to halt his scheduled execution come at a time of national reckoning over the death penalty. The Supreme Court's rulings on the issue — including a 6-3 decision in May barring condemned prisoners from seeking federal court review for ineffective counsel in some cases — are increasingly at odds with public sentiment in many states. Meanwhile, the pace of new death sentences and executions carried out nationally is on track to hit a record low for the eighth year in a row, even with the reopening of courts shuttered during the pandemic, according to the Death Penalty Information

Oklahoma is among a small number of states that routinely carry out the death penalty that are bucking that trend, and it is on pace to outdo them all despite its gruesome history of failures.

Center.

Oklahoma is among a small number of states that routinely carry out the death penalty that are bucking that trend, and it is on pace to outdo them all despite its gruesome history of failures.

The state recently set execution dates for Glossip and 24 other inmates, including several with mental illness, brain damage and claims of innocence. They're scheduled to die at a fast clip — about one each month through December 2024 — a rate that would eclipse the number of executions by all states combined since 2020.

Many observers, including those who support the death penalty, doubt the state's ability to carry out executions in a constitutional manner, even for those inmates whose guilt remains unchallenged. If the past is any judge, they're probably right.

In more than two decades covering Oklahoma's death row, here are a few of the events I wrote about, including some that I witnessed:

- In 2014, I heard one inmate say just before he was executed: "Malcom Scott and De'Marchoe

Carpenter are innocent.” The inmate had testified years earlier that the two men took part in a killing with him. They were later exonerated, but only after spending more than 20 years in prison.

- When the state needed to switch to a new lethal drug in 2014, an attorney for Oklahoma’s prison system later said that he looked for a replacement by searching for information about lethal drugs on the internet.
- A few months later, I was among the media witnesses who watched Clayton Lockett writhe, moan, talk and try to get up from the execution table for three minutes after the drugs were administered and he had been declared unconscious. The prison was using a new, unproven drug that some experts said wouldn’t anesthetize an inmate as the painful second and third drugs were administered. Prison officials closed the blinds and after about 20 minutes told us to leave the death chamber. Lockett died 43 minutes after the execution began.
- My reporting partner, Cary Aspinwall, and I later reported that the warden called the execution a “bloody mess” and that the doctor had improperly inserted the IV into Lockett, complaining about getting blood on his jacket.
- State officials used the wrong third drug to execute Charles Warner less than a year later in January 2015 but didn’t make that public. They were poised to use the wrong drug again in Glossip’s third scheduled execution before then-Gov. Mary Fallin halted it at the last minute.
- A grand jury report blasted state officials’ actions as “inexcusable,” finding that Fallin’s top lawyer wanted to proceed using the incorrect drug anyway. The state’s own attorney general said some officials had been “careless, cavalier and in some circumstances dismissive of established procedures that were intended to guard against the very mistakes that occurred.”

After a six year hiatus, Oklahoma executed John Marion Grant in October. Multiple witnesses said Grant convulsed and vomited during the process. Now, the state is preparing to execute Glossip amid doubts about his guilt.

One of the GOP lawmakers calling on the state to review Glossip’s case, despite a long history of supporting the death penalty, said he’ll advocate to end capital punishment in Oklahoma if Glossip is executed.

“I’m 99% sure that he is not guilty sitting on death row,” state Rep. Kevin McDugle said in an interview with *ProPublica*. “My stance is not anti-death penalty at all. My stance will be (different) if they put Richard to death, because that means our process in Oklahoma

is flawed.”

In a sharply worded dissent in a case challenging Oklahoma’s choice of execution drugs, then-Justice Stephen Breyer argued that the death penalty was no longer constitutional. Among his reasons, Breyer cited studies showing death penalty crimes have a disproportionately high exoneration rate.

In fact, courts have reversed verdicts or exonerated prisoners because of prosecutorial misconduct in 11 death sentences in the same county where Glossip was convicted, according to a study released last month by the Death Penalty Information Center. Another 11 from that county, home to the state Capitol, were put to death using testimony from a disgraced police chemist, the study found.

Though Glossip’s recent appeals have been unsuccessful, a state court judge and a federal judge have noted in appellate rulings the relatively thin nature of the evidence against him. “Unlike many cases in which the death penalty has been imposed, the evidence of petitioner’s guilt was not overwhelming,” the federal

“Mr. Glossip’s case gives us pause, because it appears the police investigation was not conducted in a manner that gives us confidence that we know the truth.”

judge wrote.

In a letter last year to Gov. Kevin Stitt, McDugle joined more than 30 state lawmakers, nearly all Republicans, in asking him to appoint an independent body to review Glossip’s case and examine what they say is compelling evidence he is innocent.

“Many of those who have signed this letter support the death penalty but, as such, we have a moral obligation to make sure the State of Oklahoma never executes a person for a crime he did not commit,” the letter states. “Mr. Glossip’s case gives us pause, because it appears the police investigation was not conducted in a manner that gives us confidence that we know the truth.” ■

Ziva Branstetter is a senior editor at ProPublica, supervising a team of national reporters. She previously worked at The Washington Post, founded a startup and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. This article was first published in ProPublica on July 14, 2022 and is reprinted here with permission provided under the Creative Commons license.

How Misinformation About COVID Vaccines and Pregnancy Took Root Early On and Why It Won't Go Away

By Duaa Eldeib

Even before the COVID-19 vaccine was authorized, there was a plan to discredit it.

Leaders in the anti-vaccination movement attended an online conference in October 2020 — two months before the first shot was administered — where one speaker presented on “The 5 Reasons You Might Want to Avoid a COVID-19 Vaccine” and another referred to the “untested, unproven, very toxic vaccines.”

But that was only the beginning. Misinformation seeped into every corner of social media, onto Facebook feeds and into Instagram images, pregnancy apps and Twitter posts. Pregnant people emerged as a target. A disinformation campaign preyed on their vulnerability, exploiting a deep psychological need to protect their unborn children at a moment when so much of the country was already gripped by fear.

Before coronavirus vaccines were even released, a disinformation campaign used a moment of national and personal vulnerability to prey on those who were pregnant or who planned to become pregnant.

“It’s just so powerful,” said Imran Ahmed, the founder and chief executive officer of the U.S. non-profit Center for Countering Digital Hate, which tracks online disinformation.

A majority of the disinformation came from a group of highly organized, economically motivated actors, many of them selling supplements, books or even miracle cures, he said. They told people the vaccine may harm their unborn child or deprive them of the opportunity to become parents. Some even infiltrated online pregnancy groups and asked seemingly harmless questions, such as whether people had heard the vaccine could potentially lead to infertility.

The Center for Countering Digital Hate found that nearly 70% of anti-vaccination content could be traced to 12 people, whom they dubbed The Disinformation Dozen. They reached millions of people and tested their messaging online, Ahmed said, to see what was most effective — what was most frequently shared or liked — in real time.

“The unregulated and unmoderated effects of social media where people are allowed to spread disinforma-

tion at scale without consequences meant that this took hold very fast,” Ahmed said. “That’s had a huge effect on women deciding not to take the vaccine.”

Some people, such as Robert F. Kennedy Jr., seized on the initial dearth of research into vaccines in pregnant people. “With no data showing COVID vaccines are safe for pregnant women, and despite reports of miscarriages among women who have received the experimental Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, Fauci and other health officials advise pregnant women to get the vaccine,” Kennedy posted in February 2021 on

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Facebook. Kennedy did not respond to requests for comment.

Disinformation flourished, in part, because pregnant people were not included in the vaccine’s initial clinical trials. Excluding pregnant people also omitted them from the data on the vaccine’s safety, which created a vacuum where disinformation spread. Unsure about how getting the shots might affect their pregnancy — and without clear guidance at the time from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — pregnant people last year had some of the lowest vaccination rates among adults.

The decision to delay or avoid vaccination, often made out of an abundance of caution and love for the baby growing inside of them, had dire consequences: Unvaccinated women who contracted COVID-19

while pregnant were at a higher risk of stillbirths — the death of a fetus at 20 weeks or more of pregnancy — and several other complications, including maternal death.

Although initial clinical trials did not include pregnant people, the Food and Drug Administration ensured that vaccines met a host of regulatory safety standards before authorizing them. Citing numerous studies that have since come out showing the vaccine is safe, the CDC now strongly recommends that people who are pregnant, breastfeeding or planning to become pregnant get vaccinated. The major obstetric organizations, including The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine, also urge pregnant people to get vaccinated.

But two and a half years into the pandemic, misinformation is proving resilient. A May 2022 Kaiser Family Foundation poll found more than 70% of pregnant people or those planning to become pregnant believed or were unsure whether to believe at least one of the following popular examples of misinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine: that pregnant people should not get vaccinated; that it's unsafe to get vaccinated while breastfeeding; or that the vaccine has been shown to cause infertility. None of which are true.

Dr. Laura Morris, a University of Missouri, Columbia family physician who delivers babies, has heard all those falsehoods and more from her patients. She has long relied on science to help encourage them to make well-informed decisions.

But when officials rolled out the vaccine, she found herself without her most powerful tool, data. The disinformation didn't have to completely convince people that the vaccine was dangerous; creating doubt often was sufficient.

"That level of uncertainty is enough to knock them off the path to accepting vaccination," Morris said. "Instead of seeing vaccines as something that will make them healthier and improve their pregnancy outcomes, they haven't received the right information to make them feel confident that this is actually healthy."

Before COVID-19, Morris typically saw one stillbirth every couple of years. Since the pandemic started, she said she has been seeing them more often. All followed a COVID-19 diagnosis in an unvaccinated patient just weeks before they were due. Not only did Morris have to deliver the painful news that their baby had died, she also told them that the outcome might have been different had they been vaccinated. Some, she said, felt betrayed at having believed the lies surrounding the vaccine.

"You have to have that conversation very carefully,"

Morris said, "because this is a time where the people are feeling awful and grieving and there's a lot of guilt associated with these situations that's not deserved."

In December 2021, the Federation of State Medical Boards found a proliferation of misinformation about COVID-19 among health care workers. Two-thirds of state medical boards reported an increase in complaints about misinformation, but fewer than 1 in 4 of them reported disciplining the doctors or other health care workers.

Dr. Sherri Tenpenny, an osteopath, was the speaker at the October 2020 conference who called the COVID-19 vaccine "toxic." She later testified at an Ohio state House Health Committee hearing on the Enact Vaccine Choice and Anti-Discrimination Act. She falsely claimed that the vaccine could magnetize people. "They can put a key on their forehead, it sticks," she said. "They can put spoons and forks all over them, and they could stick." She also questioned the connection between the vaccine and 5G towers.

Despite her statements, the State Medical Board of Ohio has not taken any disciplinary action against her.

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Her medical license remains active. Tenpenny did not respond to requests for comment.

It's difficult to know exactly how many doctors were disciplined, a term that can mean anything from sending them letters of guidance to revoking their license. State medical boards in some cases refused to disclose even the number of complaints received.

Some records were made public if formal disciplinary action was taken, as in the case of Dr. Mark Brody. The Rhode Island physician sent a letter to his patients that the state medical board determined contained several falsehoods, including claims that "there exists the possibility of sterilizing all females in the population who receive the vaccination." The Rhode Island Board of Medical Licensure and Discipline reprimanded him for the letter, then suspended his medical license after other professional conduct issues were uncovered. He surrendered his license in December.

Brody said in an interview that he stands by the letter. He said the word “misinformation” has been politicized and used to discredit statements with which people disagree.

“This term doesn’t really apply to science,” he said, “because science is an ever-evolving field where today’s misinformation is tomorrow’s information.”

The Washington Medical Commission has received more than 50 complaints about COVID-19 misinformation since the start of the pandemic, a spokesperson there said. California does not track misinformation complaints specifically, but a Medical Board of California spokesperson said that, in that same time period, the group received more than 1,300 COVID-19-related complaints. They included everything from fraudulent promotion of unproven medications to the spreading of misinformation.

“We were certainly surprised that more than half of boards said they had seen an increase in complaints about false or misleading information,” said Joe Knickrehm, vice president of communications for the Federation of State Medical Boards, which in April adopted a policy stating that “false information is harmful and dangerous to patients, and to the public trust in the medical profession.”

Other groups, including The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, warned doctors about spreading misinformation. In October, the organization asked its members to sign a letter endorsing the COVID-19 vaccine, writing that “the spread of misinformation and mistrust in doctors and science is contributing to staggeringly low vaccination rates among pregnant people.” But the letter was never published. “We didn’t achieve the numbers we had hoped,” a spokesperson for the organization said, “and did not want to release it if it was not going to be compelling to patients.”

The fact that some medical professionals have been spreading disinformation or failing to engage with their patients about the vaccine is profoundly disap-

pointing, said Dr. Rachel Villanueva, a clinical assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology at New York University’s Grossman School of Medicine and president of the National Medical Association, which represents Black doctors.

Research has shown that hearing directly from a health care provider can increase the likelihood that patients get vaccinated. And doctors, Villanueva said, have a responsibility to tell their patients the benefits of getting vaccinated and the risks of choosing not to. She has explained to her patients that although the vaccine development program was named Operation Warp Speed, for example, manufacturers followed proper safety protocols.

“Before COVID, there already existed a baseline distrust of the health care system, especially for women of color, feeling marginalized and feeling dismissed in the health care system,” she said. “I think that just compounded the already lack of confidence that existed in the system.” ■

Duaa Eldeib is currently investigating issues related to health inequities and race. This article was first published in ProPublica on August 4, 2022 and is reprinted here under the permission granted by the Creative Commons license. She can be reached at: Duaa.Eldeib@propublica.org

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“When we go before God, God will ask,
“Where are your wounds?” And we will say, “I have no wounds.”
And God will ask, “Was there nothing worth fighting for?”

Allan Boesak

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