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Time to Say “Good Riddance” to Bad Theology

By Patrick R. Anderson, editor

The rather unholy role played by the subset of Christians called “evangelical Christians” during the Trump era has generated angst, confusion, concern, despair, anger, and lament for Christians who are not of that tribe. I am one of those.

The newly identified hybrid, “evangelical Christian”, is certainly not a new phenomenon. Long before Jerry Falwell, Sr. and Pat Robertson and James Kennedy melded homogeneous evangelical Christians into a political force to be reckoned with, Christian fundamentalism was a powerful subset of the American landscape.

The heavy influence of fundamentalist preaching had a strong impact on my early life. I heard so many sermons about The Rapture I routinely went to sleep unsure if I would be around the next morning. I heard words like “modernists” and “virgin birth” and “compromise” sprinkled in with a literal understanding of the King James Bible. But I could never quite embrace all of it, especially the dogmatism, inconsistency, and irrationality of much of it.

Good professors at Furman University where I studied philosophy and literature helped me learn how to think. Southwestern Seminary Professors Newport, Fant, Estep, and Hendricks helped me get a grip.

Bad theology of Christians has contributed to much of the worst aspects of America’s history. The fingerprints of Christians are found all over unfettered capitalism, “manifest destiny,” and white supremacy. White Christians supported and justified and profited from slavery of Africans. Fundamentalist churches started private schools so members’ children would not have to go to school with black kids. “Separate but equal” was embraced unapologetically.

Dominion theology has contributed to policies designed to “drill baby drill” in fragile locations, to dig up and burn all the coal imaginable, to allow factories and vehicles to belch as much carbon as possible into the atmosphere, and to otherwise endanger the entire world’s ecology. Belief in the eminent “Second Coming” and the any-day-now “Rapture” has led to support for shortsighted policies regarding taking care of the earth. Christians will not be here when the earth burns up, so who cares? They cite the “signs of the times” referred to in the words of Jesus in Matthew 24,

but leave out verse 34, also spoken by Jesus in the 1st century: *Remember this! All these things will happen before the people now living have all died.*

With the arrival of Donald J. Trump, many evangelical Christians became the loudest proponents of America-first populism, rejection of science, denial of certifiable facts and blind acceptance of certifiable falsities, total abdication of righteousness and justice... all, presumably with immaculately clear consciences. The absolute devotion to Trumpism from spurious church leaders like Paula White, Jerry Falwell, Franklin Graham and far too many others has stained Christianity. Trump, a life-long inveterate liar and philanderer, convinced hoards of Christians to believe

For these past years I have been astounded by the apparent belief by many professing Christians that following Trump the consummate hedonist is consistent with following Jesus, the consummate altruist.

he was God’s man, that he loved them, that he was the only one who could make America great. His voluminous and audacious lies were accepted fervently and broadcast by clergy and laity.

Many evangelical Christians treated the COVID-19 pandemic which has already claimed the lives of more than 400,000 Americans as a hoax, false news, a plot to embarrass Trump. This was seen in their manifest refusal of perfectly reasonable and scientific precautions to the spread of the virus. Unmasked Christians were encouraged to attend crowded musical concerts, church services, and political rallies while being taught that to follow the scientists’ guidelines was an infringement of personal freedom and the free practice of religion, a plot to “take God out of America.”

Even the insurrectionists’ attack on the US Capitol and Congress on January 6th, featured highly visible Christian flags and crosses, along with Confederate battle flags, the visible imprimaturs of this false brand

of Christianity. People dressed in battle garb and toting flags, JESUS SAVES signs, and baseball bats toward the Capitol were pictured kneeling and reciting the Lord's Prayer, symbolizing their understanding that theirs was a holy endeavor.

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As the judge and preacher, Wendell Griffen, expresses elsewhere in this journal:

Any claim that Jesus is the center of one's faith and living – by people who condone bigotry against immi-

grants, racism, sexism, murdering political enemies, denial of access to healthcare services to people who are needy, and who condone mistreatment of vulnerable persons – is beyond unpersuasive. Such a claim of allegiance to Jesus amounts to moral and ethical nonsense.

The time has come to renounce this false religion, the bad theology that undergirds it, and to follow Jesus. As James wrote in his epistle: *"This is what God the Father considers to be pure and genuine religion: to take care of orphans and widows in their suffering, and to keep oneself from being corrupted by the world"* (James 1:27 TEV) ■



The Light Within You and Opening Blind Eyes: Reading John Claypool

By Walter B. Shurden

John R. Claypool, *The Light Within You* (Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1983, 216pp.)

John R. Claypool, *Opening Blind Eyes* (Oak Park, IL: Meyer Stone Books, 1987, 128pp.)

In 1960, in my second year of seminary, I had a class in Baptist history under Claude L. Howe, Jr., at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. After a class session one day, so enthralled with what we had discussed, I stayed in my desk for a few minutes, flipping my notebook to the inside back cover and writing on that cardboard an outline of what would become my first book that I would write 12 years later. That book was *Not a Silent People: Controversies That Have Shaped Southern Baptists*. Ever since, I have been fascinated with the origin of books, of how they begin.

Claypool's *The Light Within You*, published in 1983, had a fascinating birth. While the 22 sermons in the book all originated with Claypool, the book itself began with Bill Taylor, the secretary and treasurer of Young Life International. Taylor, like hundreds of others who did not get to hear Claypool's sermons in person, faithfully read those printed sermons that came out each week for 18 years. "And John Claypool," Taylor said, "brought God to me in words and terms that I could understand."

Most of the white Baptist preachers of my Southern tribe in the late 60s, 70s and 80s had scores of Claypool's sermons in their files or desk drawers. So, I understand when Taylor, as an expression of overwhelming gratitude to John Claypool, spread out approximately 800 of those sermons on the floor one day and began to select the ones that had been most meaningful to him.

What an undertaking! The truths of these sermons, he said, had "transformed my very life for Christ Jesus' sake." And the sermons Taylor selected that day became the essence of *The Light Within You*. So, while the sermons originated with Claypool, the origin of the book came from one of his many admirers.

Claypool published a second book in 1983 entitled *Opening Blind Eyes*. It, too, was a requested project.

Abingdon Press invited Claypool, along with other religious leaders, each to write a book for its *Journeys in Faith Series*. Claypool published a second edition of *Opening Blind Eyes* in 1987. It is that edition that I am using in this article; but keep in mind that he originally published the book in 1983.

The authors of the books in Abingdon's *Journeys in Faith Series* were given two mandates. First, they were to engage in spiritual autobiography and describe what happened to them and their faith in the decades of the 1960s and 70s. This was an interesting assignment, acknowledging the religiously revolutionary days of

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the 60s and early 70s. Second, Abingdon asked the writers in the series to look into the future and identify what they considered to be the major tasks of the church in the 1980s.

Claypool followed Abingdon's instructions faithfully for his 1983 book. *Opening Blind Eyes* has two very distinct parts. He called Part One, "Looking Back," and it contains 60 of the most invaluable autobiographical pages that we have from Claypool. Indeed, if you read these 60 pages along with Claypool's first book, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, you will be able to better understand almost everything that Claypool wrote. Claypool labeled Part Two of *Opening Blind Eyes* "Looking Ahead," and here he deals with substantive issues facing the Christian church in the decade of the 80s.

These two 1983 books by Claypool originated from two completely different sources. Moreover, they diverge in structure and purpose, one a book of sermons and the other a kind of spiritual memoir that concludes with a prophetic bent to it. Despite these dissimilarities, the two books fit together magically in

helping one to understand John Claypool. The sermons in *The Light Within You* are little more than informational footnotes to the autobiography in *Opening Blind Eyes*.

In the first part of *Opening Blind Eyes*, John Claypool pulls back the curtains of his life and describes three profoundly personal experiences that help one get a measure of the great preacher. The first experience, a negative one, involved his powerful, subjective feeling of growing up with a sense of unworthiness. The second experience, a positive one, concerned a transformative, palpable experience of grace. The third experience, a family tragedy, focused on Claypool's heart-breaking bereavement at the death of his young daughter, Laura Lue. Since I have described this third experience in a previous article in this journal, I will concentrate here on the first two experiences.

Claypool lamented that his "most primitive perception" of himself was "the sense that I possessed no worth! Emptiness, a zero, a vacuum---these are the images that come to mind as I recall the way I felt about myself." Rejecting the blame game, he said, "I am the one who chose to regard myself as a nobody, a nothing, a vacuum devoid of significance."

In response to this overwhelming feeling of being a nobody, Claypool "vowed to become *homo competitus*—one who would acquire significance by outdoing others." He set out on a life of acquisition and achievement. He had to out-do in order to earn worth.

While it was, of course, much more, this aspect of his life reads like a classic case of salvation by works. Loyal Claypool readers remember that one of his most memorable sermons, a sermon included in *The Light Within You*, is titled "Who Is Your Audience?" He said in that sermon, "We each feel the need for something outside ourselves to evaluate and authenticate our deeds." That line came deep from within Claypool's psyche.

All the rest of us who marveled at his gifts and his grace are left bewildered by how that could ever be. But we should not doubt its truth for him. This was no mock humility, no faux self-portrait designed to elicit pity or to project a kind of inverted spirituality. Claypool's negative self-image, despite all evidence to the contrary, haunted and harangued him.

Then occurred the second experience. "In the midst of my mid-life crisis, something happened that proved to be positively electrifying in altering my consciousness of reality itself. The greatest single shift in my whole existence---from seeing life in terms of acquisition to seeing it in terms of awareness."

A Presbyterian minister friend in Louisville called

Claypool one day in a painful cry for help. He asked Claypool to be one of five ministers to meet with him and offer him some pastoral help. Claypool remembered two things about that first session as the ministers opened up to each other in an effort to help. One was that each of the six, though very different in religious and social backgrounds, voiced the same "conflicts and pressures" and grieved much the same personal issues. And two, he learned that "honesty evoked compassion."

In time, Claypool said he opened up to the group and "went all the way back and all the way down to those earliest, reality-conclusions that had shaped my life so powerfully. I acknowledged the bottomless feeling of nobodiness, the desperate need to acquire a sense of worth by my own strenuous effort. . . ." And after emptying himself of his most honest feelings, he confessed, "It was as if I had lanced a boil and all the infected pus was gushing forth."

An Episcopal priest and the minister in the group with whom Claypool had the least natural affinity

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spoke. "I hear you, John, oh, I hear you!" He continued. "Do you know what we need? . . . We need to hear the gospel down in our guts. Do you remember in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus said, 'You are the Light of the World'? He did not say that you have to earn light or become number one in order to get light. He said simply, 'You are light.'"

Claypool later wrote that as the priest spoke these words, "I felt something akin to fire flow from the top of my head to the depths of my heart, and for the first time in my life I *experienced* grace." The image Claypool used for that experience was awareness. He moved from acquisition to awareness. "My eyes were opened in that instant as never before. I began to 'see' myself and eventually all things in a completely different light." Blind eyes were opened. He became aware that worth came with the grace of creation.

The old Zen image of "riding on an ox, looking for an ox" became important for Claypool. All his life

searching for worth outside himself, he had eventually discovered he had it within him all along. “You *are* the light of the world” became for him what the Damascus Road was for Saul of Tarsus, what the tower experience was for Luther, and what Aldersgate was for Wesley. He had moved from trying to acquire worthiness to an awareness that worth came with creation.

These two experiences appear in one form or another again and again in the sermons in *The Light Within You*. For example, in a sermon entitled “Our Peace Is in Our Place,” Claypool identified the reasons for the tragic demise of King Saul, a man who began with enormous promise. As though speaking of himself, John Claypool said that one of Saul’s problems was Saul’s “self-image, how he viewed his place in the economy of God’s purpose. For some reason, Saul was never able to accept himself—never able to feel, down to the bottom of his being, ‘By the grace of God I am what I am.’” The preacher continued, “In my judgment, there is no issue of any greater practical significance than this issue of self-image. How do you view the gift of God that is yourself? All depends on your response. To accept yourself positively and live creatively on the basis of what God has made you is the way to joy, but to deny and reject God’s gift of yourself is the way to ruin.”

I told you above that in the second half of *Opening Blind Eyes*, Claypool identified what he thought was the task of the Church in the future, which for him at that time meant the 1980s. Significantly, the very first issue he pinpoints is this issue of how individuals feel about themselves. “I feel strongly,” he wrote, “that the church should invest significant energy in ministry to individuals---be concerned with the way they image themselves, feel about themselves. This is a foundational sector of human experience. I agree with the old dictum that ‘if religion stops with the individual, it stops---period.’ But the other side of the truth is that if religion does not begin with the individual, it will not begin at all.”

He then used the story of the Prodigal Son, a New Testament text as important for Claypool as Genesis 1-3, an Old Testament text, was for him to illustrate his point. The Prodigal had to learn that he was neither a Superman without limits who could make life on his own nor was he a slave. The waiting father viewed the Prodigal not as a “hired servant” but as “this my son.”

So, what was the challenge of the Church in the 80s? For Claypool, I am sure it would have been the same as the challenge of any era. He said, “In relation to self-image, then, the challenge of the church is to open blind eyes to two realities: a true image of self; and the

mercy that gives us life apart from our deserving---not once, but again and again. What a gospel this is! What a privilege to work to unmask illusions and enable people to ‘come to themselves’ and to the mercy that will not let them go, that never gives up, and that celebrates whenever and however blind eyes are finally opened.”

Claypool’s intense dual convictions of a lack of self-worth and of the abundance of grace deepened his ability to teach people how to put one foot in front of the other, how to make it through the week, how to live. In *Opening Blind Eyes*, he recalled his decision to enter the Christian ministry. He said that as a young adult he genuinely wanted to serve humanity and leave the world a better place. Thinking that becoming a medical doctor was the best way to serve, he shared this opinion with their family’s doctor, a rather gruff and matter-of-fact kind of fellow.

Claypool remarked to the doctor, “You doctors help people so tangibly.” The doc retorted, “Hell! What people need most is somebody to teach them how to

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live. I have lots of patients who get well and are still miserable.” That chance remark, Claypool said, was revolutionary for him. “Teaching people how to live---that is the most tangible need,” he concluded. “And as I looked about for ways to engage in that sort of task,” he said, “the role of Christian minister seemed more to the point than any other.”

And Bill Taylor and thousands of others say to this very day, “Thanks be to God that he chose the path that led him to the pulpit.” ■

Walter B. Shurden is Minister At Large at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia where he resides with his wife, Kay. He is a theologian, church historian, and connoisseur of good preaching. This article is one of six he is writing for Christian Ethics Today that address the writings of John Claypool.

Critical Race Theory: Thoughts from J. Alfred Smith, Sr.

By Mark Wingfield

J. Alfred Smith Sr. is not happy with the six Southern Baptist Convention presidents, who recently issued a declaration against Critical Race Theory.

“They are more afraid of Critical Race Theory than the ugly racism that has our democracy about to be crucified with lies. They are complicit with evil. They don’t speak out against conspiracy theories. But they will make a big hullabaloo about Critical Race Theory,” said the veteran California Baptist pastor and denominational leader.

Smith served four decades as pastor of Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland, Calif., and earned a doctor of ministry degree at nearby Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, one of the six SBC seminaries. He is a member of the American Baptist Churches in the USA and dually aligned with the Progressive National Baptist Convention, where he served as the organization’s 12th president.

For many years, Smith participated in a partnership with Golden Gate Seminary and the then-Home Mission Board of the SBC training pastors and denominational leaders in urban ministry.

Now 89 and retired about an hour away from Oakland, Smith still reads widely and quotes biblical references from memory in rapid succession. He reads, he said, “to exercise the muscles of my mind.”

And from his vantage point, the SBC seminary presidents need to exercise the muscles of their minds a bit more too.

“I’m not going to be charitable,” he said. “They want to take passages of critical theory that are expressed by people like Cornel West when he spoke of Marx’s methodology to unmask evil and its oppression of people at the bottom. They say they are biblical and that’s why they can’t go with Critical Race Theory.

“But Amos, the eighth-century prophet, exposes the same thing. I don’t understand why they ignore the eighth-century prophets and ignore the Jesus of the Gospels,” he continued. “They are in bed with the Pauline transcendental Christ and not with the Christ who preached his first sermon from Isaiah 61.”

By that last point, he means there is theological peril by reading Paul apart from the Gospels.

“If you just read Paul, you never would have known

that Jesus was born poor in a manger and that he was born to an oppressed nation,” Smith explained. “That he was born as a Jew in oppressive Rome and that he was an immigrant in Egypt. The Jesus of Matthew 5, the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, the Jesus of Matthew 25. the closest that Paul gets to that kind of thinking — and it is still metaphysical and transcendental — is over in Philippians, when he talks about the kenosis that emptied himself and became a servant even unto death, the death of the cross. But most of Paul is a quibble with Judaism.”

“The SBC seminary presidents” — all white men —

Christians should celebrate those theological leaders who — unlike the SBC leaders — “are not captive to the structural logic of normalized white supremacy that preserves dehumanizing axiological systems that sacralize and legitimize racism in the theological academy.

“do not own the Christian story,” Smith asserted.

Instead, he suggested, Christians should celebrate those theological leaders who — unlike the SBC leaders — “are not captive to the structural logic of normalized white supremacy that preserves dehumanizing axiological systems that sacralize and legitimize racism in the theological academy.”

“Those who reject Black womanist and male theologians and pastors of liberation need to read again but for the first time the truth that early Christianity was in the middle East and North Africa,” he declared.

Smith cited theologian and author Esau McCaulley, who wrote in his book *Reading While Black*: “In the stories of Ephraim and Manasseh, we see that the promise of Abraham was first fulfilled by bringing two African boys into the people of God. We saw the inclu-

sion of Africans again reiterated when a multiethnic group left Egypt.”

Christians and seminary leaders who want to truly understand Critical Race Theory ought to read another book, too, Smith said: *With Liberty and Justice for Some: The Bible, the Constitution and Racism in America*, by Susan Smith.

This one book, Smith believes, “would open the eyes of good-meaning white people who say they’re not prejudiced.”

Believing you’re not prejudiced is not the same thing as understanding prejudice and racism, he explained. “The average white layperson does not understand structural racism and how it’s in the grain of the wood so that they are socialized and even a person like myself has been socialized to accept the normality of white privilege.

“So many of the Southern Baptists talk about this from a cognitive point of view and it becomes theoretical and abstract, while I feel the pain of it because I have children and grandchildren and great grandchildren.

“I have a great grandson who fights the same battle that I’m fighting,” the pastor said. “And we thought we were making progress under his dad, but racism went underground and then ‘Trump-vangelicalism’ made racism raise its ugly serpentine head and gave credibility to it.”

Despite the protestations of the six SBC seminary presidents, systemic racism is real and dangerous in America today, Smith said. “Systemic racism is racism that’s ingrained into the culture.

“Every Black father like myself has to pull his young son aside and explain to that boy how to act if he’s stopped by the police. No white man even thinks about that. They just assume the police officer is a friend to their son and if they get caught for doing something minor the police will put them in the car and drive them home. But if you’re Black, look out. What if you’re not brought home, if you don’t make it home alive?”

Smith learned these lessons from a young age, growing up in Kansas City, Mo., which he called a “Southern state with a Northern exposure.” He attended segregated schools there.

But in the summertime, when he was sent to visit family in Mississippi, he learned other lessons. “I would have to move to the back train, to the very last coach, when we crossed the Mason and Dixon Line.”

And upon arrival in Mississippi, things got worse. “I remember waking up one morning in Mississippi to go to the store with my cousin in a place called Jonestown, Miss. While walking into the center of

town with my cousin, there were older white men sitting in chairs in front of the store buildings. And one of them said to me, ‘Good morning, Little Nigger.’ I said, ‘My name is not Little Nigger. My name is James Smith.’ They said to me, ‘Boy, you’re not from around here are you?’”

In those days, the sidewalks were not made of concrete but of wooden planks. “When a white person came from the opposite direction, Black people had to get off the sidewalk until they passed. You weren’t allowed to look a white person in the eye. You had to look down.”

From a young age, he said, he knew “the meanness of Mississippi racism.”

And yet even as an esteemed pastor of a prominent church in the San Francisco Bay area, he continued to experience systemic racism years later.

“The Allen Temple Baptist Church was redlined when it came to buying insurance just because of where we lived, just because of our ZIP Code. We put up a beautiful sanctuary with stained glass windows.

“I have a great grandson who fights the same battle that I’m fighting,” the pastor said. “And we thought we were making progress under his dad, but racism went underground and then ‘Trump-vangelicalism’ made racism raise its ugly serpentine head and gave credibility to it.”

But no bank in the city of Oakland was lending money to Black churches. We had to deposit our money with them, and they were using our money for investments, yet we couldn’t borrow money from them to build the church. We had to borrow money from American Baptists. That’s structural racism.”

With no help from the local banks, the church built and installed a set of stained-glass windows with a unique perspective. On one side of the sanctuary is a set of windows depicting Black men and women pioneers. On the opposite side, a set of windows with images of biblical characters.

And above the baptismal pool, a hand-painted image of Philip baptizing a Black Ethiopian eunuch.

The church’s website quotes Smith as saying “the stained-glass windows serve as a teaching message of

race pride — Black men and women who were committed to lifting up the race.” And in those windows, he said, “I especially want children to see the beauty of Black people who convey a message of hope in a hostile world.”

Today, reflecting on the denial of systemic racism by the SBC seminary presidents, Smith looks again to the windows. He sees there “Black images of women and men liberation leaders in the blood-soaked struggle against demonic racism.”

And then he concludes: “I am 89 years old. And I’m too old to bow down to President Mohler and his

cohorts. I talk the way I talk because I want to die free.” ■

Mark Wingfield is executive director and publisher of Baptist News Global . He recently served 17 years as associate pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas. Mark conducted a telephone interview with Dr. Smith which is the source of this article published in Baptist News Global on December 15, 2020 under the title, “SBC seminary presidents are ‘complicit with evil,’ revered California pastor says.” Permission to reprint here is gratefully accepted and appreciated.

OKAY, BOYS

--- for the Wall of Moms
Friday, July 24

After the many things
you’ve already had to stand
and stare down for your children,
a bunch of unmarked federal troops
in camouflage and rental vans
probably don’t scare you.

Moms can see right through
all those helmets and dark glasses
and know exactly what’s behind them.
just a line of confused sons with guns,
whose mothers are at home wondering
what kind of trouble they’re up to now.

Sons confused by seeing you there...
some as to what their orders are...
all by testosterone and adrenaline.
whatever it is they-re not sure of,
you appear to be considerably sure
about what it is you’re sure about.

And we are grateful. And in awe.
So lock arms ladies. We need you
now...as much as we always will.

---By Nathan Brown,
published in a book of poetry,
In the Days of Our Unrest, June-August 2020
Norman, Oklahoma: Mezcalita Press

COVID-19 Vaccines: A Message of Hope

By Aurora Pop-Vicas

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11).

The year 2020 has engaged the world in a war against an invisible enemy – a virus that has infected more than 90 million and killed almost 2 million people so far.¹ By now we all know someone who has either died or been hospitalized with severe COVID-19 illness. Most of us have seen our lives upended by job losses, financial insecurity, travel restrictions and social distance measures that clouded our holidays, took a toll on our relationships, and left our mental health precariously fragile.

Fortunately, there is palpable hope on the horizon. The first COVID-19 vaccines became available shortly before Christmas, and millions of frontline workers and nursing home residents in several countries have already received their first dose. Soon, the vaccine will likely be offered to the public, including the readers of this journal, should they choose to accept it.

The fact that we now have a powerful weapon that can tip the outcome of this war heavily in our favor should be a source of unadulterated joy for all, one would think. Unfortunately, my Facebook page continues to be inundated by comments and posts oozing disinformation, fear, doubt and negativity – too often from individuals loudly proclaiming their “Christian faith” in the same breath, I am sorry to say. Clearly not everyone views scientific wonders of incredible benefit to humankind as cause for celebration. And although in other controversial circumstances we can afford to reserve judgement and let things play out for a while before we take a stance, we do not have the luxury to wait and see now. The stakes are too high, as our choices vis-à-vis COVID-19 vaccines will largely impact the outcome of 2021 for all of us.

Precursors of Vaccines

Vaccine development is undoubtedly one of the most fascinating historical achievements. It first started as a means of preventing smallpox, a disease which, although largely unknown today, has plagued the world for millennia, bringing down empires and wiping-out civilizations. The smallpox epidemic of 108 AD, for example, triggered the decline of the

Roman Empire by killing almost seven million of its citizens.² The introduction of smallpox into the New World with the arrival of the Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors hastened the demise of the Aztec and Incan Empires. The intentional use of smallpox by the British during the French Indian War (1754 – 1767) as a biological warfare agent decimated a large segment of the American Indian tribes on the eastern coast of North America.³ Meanwhile, in early 18th century Europe, the “speckled monster” killed 400,000 people each year, leaving survivors blind or disfigured for life.⁴

The precursor to the first vaccine was an inoculation practice called “variola,” (from *variola*, the name

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of the smallpox virus), which gained popularity in the 18th century. In variolation, fresh material obtained from a ripe pustule of someone suffering from smallpox was subcutaneously inoculated, usually via a lancet, onto the arm or leg of a person who had never had smallpox. This caused a lighter form of the disease that self-resolved and subsequently rendered the variolation recipient immune.⁵ Variolation was widely practiced in the Ottoman Empire and witnessed by Lady Mary Wortley Montague, wife of the English ambassador to the Sublime Porte, during her stay in Istanbul. Lady Montague, who had lost her beauty to smallpox, submitted her five-year-old son to variolation at the sultan’s court in 1718. She then had her four-year-old daughter inoculated in front of the royal court physicians upon her return to England in 1721.

After successful trials on a widely diverse population of prisoners, orphans and the two daughters of the

then Princess of Wales, the practice became widely used among nobility and commoners alike throughout Europe and the New World colonies.⁶ There were drawbacks, of course: About two to three percent of variolated persons died of smallpox or became infected with syphilis and tuberculosis – not surprising given the crude manner of the inoculation. Nevertheless, the mortality rate of variolation-associated smallpox was merely one-tenth the mortality rate associated with naturally occurring smallpox.⁶

Vaccines Arrive: Smallpox Eradicated

The first vaccine was developed by Edward Jenner, an English physician, in 1796. As a 13-year-old teenager and apprentice to a country surgeon, he had overheard a dairymaid declare, “I shall never have smallpox, for I have had cowpox. I shall never have an ugly pockmarked face.”⁷ Many years later, after Jenner started his own medical practice, he postulated that the deliberate transmission of cowpox from one person to another could protect against smallpox. To test this theory, he inoculated material from a dairymaid’s cowpox sore into the arm of an eight-year-old boy, the son of his gardener. One can only imagine the conversations between the doctor, the gardener and the boy. The boy developed mild symptoms (a low-grade fever, axillary discomfort, loss of appetite), and made a full recovery within 10 days. A few months later, Jenner inoculated the boy with smallpox material repeatedly, but the boy never developed the disease.⁵

Although his initial writings were met with skepticism, by the time Jenner published his 1801 treatise “On the Origin of the Vaccine Inoculation,” detailing his experiments with “*vaccination*” (from Latin *vacca* = cow, and *vaccinia* = cowpox), he had gained important allies within the medical community, and subsequently convinced the British Parliament to fund his scientific work.⁵ In 1800, Edward Jenner’s vaccine material made its way to Benjamin Waterhouse, a physician and professor at Harvard Medical School, who vaccinated four of his children, implemented vaccination throughout New England, and appealed to then vice-president Thomas Jefferson with the “prospect of exterminating smallpox.” Thomas Jefferson expressed his support for the project in a letter dated Christmas Day, 1800. He continued to champion public vaccination throughout the United States after he became president the next year. In 1813, US Congress established the National Vaccine Institute, with Benjamin Waterhouse appointed to a leadership role.⁸

These initial efforts paved the way to the eventual eradication of smallpox. After the disease was eliminated from North America in 1952 and from Europe in

1953, the World Health Organization (WHO) began a global eradication plan in 1959. At first, lack of funds, commitment, and resources from the most affected countries, combined with significant vaccine supply shortages, allowed smallpox to continue unabated. Ultimately, improvement in vaccine technology and production, creation of effective infection surveillance systems, and intensified mass vaccination campaigns proved successful. On May 8, 1980, almost 200 years after Jenner’s dream that “the annihilation of the smallpox, the most dreadful scourge of the human species, must be the final result” of his vaccine discovery, the WHO declared smallpox eradicated, and the world celebrated what, until now, has been considered the highest international achievement in public health.⁹

Vaccines for COVID-19

We now find ourselves at another historical tipping point – in the middle of an enormous global health crisis-- but within reach of the most promising public health tool to overcome it. The discovery, trial,

The discovery, trial, approval and international distribution of COVID-19 vaccines that are 95 percent effective in less than one-year (a process which usually takes four to 10 years), is an extraordinary triumph of global cooperation and scientific progress.

approval and international distribution of COVID-19 vaccines that are 95 percent effective in less than one-year (a process which usually takes four to 10 years), is an extraordinary triumph of global cooperation and scientific progress. Of course, this success is the end-result of enormous sacrifice and passion poured over decades-long research by amazing scientists, with visionary investment from multiple governments, companies and private foundations who provided billions in financial support for these efforts.

Vaccines generally work by introducing into the human body a viral protein or an inactivated viral fragment (called an antigen), which the body recognizes as foreign, triggering an immune response meant to destroy the invading substance. Memory cells formed in the process are maintained and dormant after this initial encounter. If the vaccinated person is subsequently exposed to the natural virus during an epi-

demic, for example, memory cells quickly activate the body's immune response against an invader they are already familiar with, preventing the immunized person from being infected or becoming ill.¹⁰

Two of the COVID-19 vaccines currently in use rely on a novel approach which introduces the genetic material that instructs the cell to produce the intended viral antigen, rather than directly administering the intended antigen, as done with conventional vaccines. This novel messenger RNA (mRNA) technology has been the focus of intense research over the last 10-15 years, often in the context of cancer vaccines. It allows for the chemical synthesis of vaccine candidates within a few days, as opposed to the longer time required by traditional vaccine biotechnology. Prior work on related coronaviruses such as those causing severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) has established that the best vaccine antigen is the viral spike protein. Once the genome of the SARS-CoV-2 virus causing COVID-19 was sequenced and made internationally available in January of 2020, and just a few days after the first pneumonia cases reported in Wuhan, China, scientists could create a vaccine antigen by tuning the appropriate mRNA genetic sequence that codes for this viral spike protein.¹¹

Scientific Heroes

The stories of the scientists at the forefront of this technology with potential to revolutionize the vaccinology field are quite remarkable. For example, Katalin Kariko, a Hungarian biochemist, has worked on developing RNA therapies for 40 years. She started in her twenties while earning her PhD at the University of Szeged, but soon reached a dead-end due to lack of research funding. She fled communism, immigrating to the U.S. in the 1980s with her husband and two-year-old daughter, hiding the \$1,200 received from selling the family car in her daughter's teddy bear. She continued her RNA work at Temple University and, later, at the University of Pennsylvania. The scientific community of the 1990s often dismissed her RNA research, which made securing laboratory grant funding challenging. She persevered despite being demoted from her tenured faculty track position.

The situation changed in 1997 in front of a department's photocopier where she serendipitously met Drew Weissman, a newly arrived MD-PhD immunologist working on HIV vaccines. The two scientists realized they had common research interests and started collaborating, successfully publishing in 2005 a groundbreaking work on how synthetically modified bacterial or viral RNA can stimulate human immune

responses.¹² They later showed that enveloping synthetic RNA in a coat of lipid nanoparticles prevents premature degradation and facilitates entry into human cells, making it a feasible therapeutic. This strategy was used in 2020 to develop the mRNA COVID-19 vaccines by two biotech companies that proved instrumental in the vaccine race – Moderna in the U.S., and BioNTech in Germany. Katalin Kariko, now a senior vice president at BioNTech, is seeing her life-long dream come true at the age of 65. In the future, she is likely to share a Nobel Prize with Dr. Weissman. Her daughter has already known success of her own, winning two Olympic gold medals as part of the U.S. rowing team in 2008 and 2012.¹³

The story of Dr. Ugur Sahin and his wife, Dr. Ozlem Tureci, the physician couple owning BioNTech, is no less impressive. Although they are now billionaires, they live an understated life, focused on work aimed at finding new treatments and saving lives. They reside in a modest apartment, bike to work and own no car. They both come from Turkish families that immi-

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grated to Germany. Dr. Sahin, whose parents worked for a Ford company in Cologne, became a physician and earned a doctorate in 1993 from the University of Cologne for work on immunotherapy in tumor cells. Dr. Tureci, the daughter of a physician originally from Istanbul, initially wanted to be a nun, but ultimately followed in her father's footsteps. She met Dr. Sahin while they were both working on a hospital oncology

ward in Homburg. On the day of their wedding, the couple returned to their research lab shortly after the ceremony.

They founded BioNTech in 2008, and focused primarily on finding immunotherapies for cancer, including through vaccines based on mRNA technology.¹⁴ In January of 2020, when Dr. Sahin read a paper in *The Lancet* describing the spread of the novel coronavirus causing pneumonia throughout China,¹⁵ he became convinced that a pandemic was unfolding, and summoned his scientists from their vacations to begin working on a vaccine. They soon identified several promising candidates, but needed help to manufacture the vaccine at mass-scale and to conduct large international clinical trials. The company had been collaborating with Pfizer since 2018 on flu vaccine research. As a result, Dr. Sahin had developed a unique friendship with Albert Bourla, the Greek CEO of Pfizer. In March 2020, they agreed to work together on COVID-19 vaccine development.¹⁴ In December 2020, they published the results of their collaboration in the *New England Journal of Medicine*: a 95 percent vaccine efficacy in a double-blind, randomized, placebo-control trial that enrolled almost 44,000 adults.^{16,17} At the same time, the second vaccine relying on mRNA technology, developed by Moderna in the U.S., reported a 94 percent efficacy in a trial of 30,000 participants.¹⁸

A Message of Hope

We begin the year 2021 in hope. We have safe and effective vaccines, produced through incredible efforts of international collaboration, with enormous public and private funding, showing what humans can accomplish when they come together in times of crisis. For those of us with faith in God, we undoubtedly see God's hand at work, as we contemplate how the pieces perfectly complete the puzzle of history.

As an infectious disease physician, I was fortunate enough to receive my first COVID-19 vaccine dose in December 2020. Despite having a history of severe allergies, including anaphylaxis, I experienced no vaccine side effects, other than a mildly sore arm for a day.

The psalmist's words written thousands of years ago once again rang true: *I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.... I will not fear the terror of night, ... nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday* (Psalm 91). ■

Aurora Pop-Vicas, MD, MPH is Assistant Professor in the Department of Medicine, Division of Infectious Disease, at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, Madison, WI

Note: This essay, including the references, can be found at: www.christianethicstoday.com/wp/?p=3235

*“Jesus was not killed by atheism and anarchy.
He was brought down by law and order allied with religion,
which is always a deadly mix.
Beware of those who claim to know the mind of God
and who are prepared to use force, if necessary, to make others conform.
Beware of those who cannot tell God's will from their own.”*

Barbara Brown Taylor

A Scholar of American Anti-Semitism Explains the Hate Symbols Present During the US Capitol Riot

By Jonathan D. Sarna

One of the many horrifying images from the Jan. 6 rampage on the U.S. Capitol shows a long-haired, long-bearded man wearing a black “Camp Auschwitz” T-shirt emblazoned with a skull and crossbones, and under it the phrase “work brings freedom” – an English translation of the Auschwitz concentration camp motto: “Arbeit macht frei.”

Another image, more subtle but no less incendiary, is of a different man whose T-shirt was emblazoned with the inscription “6MWE” above yellow symbols of Italian Fascism. “6MWE” is an acronym common among the far right standing for “6 Million Wasn’t Enough.” It refers to the Jews exterminated during the Nazi Holocaust and hints at the desire of the wearer to increase that number still further.

These and related images, captured on television and retweeted on social media, demonstrate that some of those who traveled to Washington to support President Donald Trump were engaged in much more than just a doomed effort to maintain their hero in power.

As their writings make clear to me as a scholar of American anti-Semitism, some among them also hoped to trigger what is known as the “Great Revolution,” based on a fictionalized account of a government takeover and race war, that, in its most extreme form, would exterminate Jews.

Calls to exterminate Jews are common in far-right and white nationalist circles. For example, the conspiracy theorists of QAnon, who hold “that the world is run by a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who are plotting against Mr. Trump,” traffic in it regularly.

The anonymous “Q” – the group’s purported head who communicates in riddles and leaves clues on message boards – once approvingly retweeted the anti-Semitic image of a knife-wielding Jew wearing a Star of David necklace who stands knee-deep in the blood of Russians, Poles, Hungarians and Ukrainians and asks with feigned innocence, “Why do they persecute me so?”

Images of long-nosed Jews dripping with the blood of non-Jews whom they are falsely accused of murdering have a long and tragic history. Repeatedly, they have served as triggers for anti-Semitic violence.

More commonly, including in recent days, QAnon

has targeted Jewish billionaire philanthropist and investor George Soros, whom it portrays as the primary figure shaping and controlling world events. A century ago, the Rothschilds, a family of Jewish bankers, was depicted in much the same way.

QAnon members also mark Jews with triple parentheses, a covert means of outing those whom they consider usurpers and outsiders, not true members of the white race.

‘White genocide’

Another website popular in white nationalist circles

Members of the Proud Boys, another group that sent members to Washington, likewise traffic in anti-Semitism. One of the group’s leaders, Kyle Chapman, recently promised to “confront the Zionist criminals who wish to destroy our civilization.” The West, he explained “was built by the White Race alone and we owe nothing to any other race.”

displayed photographs of Jewish women and men, downloaded from university websites, so as to help readers distinguish Jews from the “Aryan Master Race.” “Europeans are the children of God,” it proclaims. “(((They)))” – denominating Jews as other without even mentioning them – “are the children of Satan.”

The website justifies rabid anti-Semitism by linking Jews to the forces supposedly seeking to undermine racial hierarchies. “White genocide is (((their))) plan,” it declares, again marking Jews with triple parentheses, “counter-(((extermination))) is our response.”

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Chapman, like many of his peers, uses the term "white genocide" as a shorthand way of expressing the fear that the members of the white population of the United States, like themselves, will soon be overwhelmed by people of color. The popular 14-word white supremacist slogan, visible on signs outside the Capitol on Wednesday, reads "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children."

Composed by David Lane, one of the conspirators behind the 1984 assassination of Jewish radio host Alan Berg, this slogan originally formed part of a larger document entitled "The White Genocide Manifesto." Its 14 planks insist that Jews are not white and actually endanger white civilization. "All Western nations are ruled by a Zionist conspiracy to mix, overrun and exterminate the White race," the manifesto's seventh plank reads.

While influenced by the infamous anti-Semitic forgery known as The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the document goes further, blaming members of what it euphemistically calls the "Zionist occupation governments of America" for homosexuality and abortion as well.

QAnon followers, the Proud Boys and the other far-right and alt-right groups that converged on Washington imagined that they were living out the great fantasy that underlies what many consider to be the bible of the white nationalism movement, a 1978 dystopian novel, "The Turner Diaries," by William Luther Pierce.

The novel depicts the violent overthrow of the government of the United States, nuclear conflagration, race war and the ultimate extermination of nonwhites and "undesirable racial elements among the remaining White population."

Symbolism outside the Capitol

As opinion writer Seyward Darby pointed out in *The New York Times*, the gallows erected in front of the Capitol recalls the novel's depiction of "the day of the rope," when so-called betrayers of their race were lynched. Unmentioned in *The New York Times* article is that the novel subsequently depicts "a war to the death with the Jew."

The book warns Jews that their "day is coming." When it does, at the novel's conclusion, mass lynchings and a takeover of Washington set off a worldwide conflagration, and, within a few days "the throat of the last Jewish survivor in the last kibbutz and in the last, smoking ruin in Tel Aviv had been cut."

"The Turner Diaries" denouement coupled with the anti-Semitic images from the Capitol on Wednesday serve as timely reminders of the precarious place Jews occupy in different corners of the United States. Even as some celebrate how Jews have become white and privileged, others dream of Jews' ultimate extermination. ■

*Jonathan D. Sarna is University Professor and Joseph H. & Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History, Brandeis University. He has consulted for the Anti-Defamation League and, as a member of the Jewish community, is particularly concerned with the issue of antisemitism. He teaches the course on American Antisemitism at Brandeis University. This essay first appeared in *The Conversation* on January 8, 2021 and is published here with permission.*

*Those who can make you believe absurdities,
can make you commit atrocities.
....Voltaire*

Secular ‘Values Voters’ are Becoming an Electoral Force in the US – Just Look Closely at 2020’s Results

By Phil Zuckerman

The voting patterns of religious groups in the U.S. have been scrutinized since the presidential election for evidence of shifting allegiances among the faithful. Many have wondered if a boost in Catholic support was behind Biden’s win or if a dip in support among evangelicals helped doom Trump.

But much less attention has been paid to one of the largest growing demographics among the U.S. electorate, one that has increased from around 5% of Americans to over 23% in the last 50 years: “Nones” – that is, the nonreligious.

I am a scholar of secularism in the U.S., and my focus is on the social and cultural presence of secular people – nonreligious people such as atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers and those who simply don’t identify with any religion. They are an increasingly significant presence in American society, one which inevitably spills into the political arena. In this last election, the emerging influence of secular voters was felt not only at the presidential level, but also on many down-ballot issues.

The new ‘values voters’

For years, both scholars and pundits have referred to the political impact of “values voters” in America. What that designation generally refers to are religious men and women whose scripturally based values coagulate around issues such as opposing marriage equality and women’s reproductive autonomy.

But dubbing such religious voters as “values voters” is a real semantic bamboozle. While it is true that many religious Americans maintain certain values that motivate their voting behavior, it is also very much the case that secular Americans also maintain their own strongly held values. My research suggests they vote on these values with just as much motivation as the religious.

Sex education

This played out in November in a number of ballot initiatives that have flown under the national media radar.

Voters in Washington state, for example, passed Referendum 90, which requires that students receive sex education in all public schools. This was the first time that such a measure was ever on a state ballot, and it passed with ease – thanks, in part, to the significant number of nonreligious voters in the Pacific Northwest.

The fact is, Washington is one of the least religious states in the union. Well over a third of all Washingtonians do not affiliate with any religion,

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more than a third never pray and almost 40% never attend religious services.

The referendum’s passing was helped by the fact that nonreligious adults tend to value comprehensive sex education. Numerous studies have found that secular Americans are significantly more likely to support comprehensive sex education in school. In his research, sociologist Mark Regnerus found that secular parents were generally much more comfortable – and more likely – to have open and frank conversations with their children about safe sex than religious parents.

Drugs policy

Meanwhile, voters in Oregon – another Pacific Northwestern state that contains one of the most secular populations in the country – passed Measure 110,

the first ever statewide law to decriminalize the possession and personal use of drugs.

This aligns with research showing that nonreligious Americans are much more likely to support the decriminalization of drugs than their religious peers. For instance, a 2016 study from Christian polling firm Barna found that 66% of evangelicals believe that all drugs should be illegal as did 43% of other Christians, but only 17% of Americans with no religious faith held such a view.

Science at the ballot box

Secular people are generally more trusting of scientific empiricism, and various studies have shown that the nonreligious are more likely to accept the evidence behind human-generated climate change. This translates to support for politicians and policies that take climate change seriously.

It may also have factored into the success of a November ballot measure in Denver, Colorado, to fund programs that eliminate greenhouse gases, fight air pollution and actively adapt to climate change. The ballot passed with over 62% of the vote – and it is of note that Denver is one of the most secular cities in the nation.

Meanwhile voters in California – another area of relative secularity – passed Proposition 14 supporting the funding of stem cell research, the state being one of only a handful that has a publicly funded program. Pew studies have repeatedly found that secular Americans are far more likely than religious Americans to support stem cell research.

Values versus values

On issues that the religious right has held some sway in recent years, there is evidence of a counterbalance among secular “value voters.”

For example, while the religious have been more likely to oppose same-sex marriage, secular Americans are more likely to support it, and by significant margins. A recent Pew study found that 79% of secular Americans are supportive, compared to 66% of white mainline Protestants, 61% of Catholics, 44% of Black Protestants and 29% of white evangelicals.

There are many additional values that are prominent among secular Americans. For example, the U.S. Secular Survey of 2020 – the largest survey of nonreligious Americans ever conducted, with nearly 34,000 participants – found strong support for safeguarding the separation of church and state.

Other studies have found that secular Americans strongly support women’s reproductive rights, women working in the paid labor force,

the DACA program, death with dignity and opposition to the death penalty.

Secular surge

According to Eastern Illinois University professor Ryan Burge’s data analysis, around 80% of atheists and agnostics and 70% of those who described their religion as “nothing in particular” voted for Biden.

This may have been decisive. As Professor Burge argues, “it’s completely fair to say that these shifts generated a two percentage-point swing for Biden nationwide. There were five states where the gap between the candidates was less than two percentage points (Georgia, Arizona, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and North Carolina). Four of those five went for the Biden – and the nones were between 28% and 37% of the population in those key states.”

As this past election has shown, secular values are not only alive and well, but they are more pronounced than ever. It is also noteworthy that more openly non-religious candidates were elected to public office than

Other studies have found that secular Americans strongly support women’s reproductive rights, women working in the paid labor force, the DACA program, death with dignity and opposition to the death penalty.

ever before. According to an analysis by the atheist author and activist Hemant Mehta, not only did every member of the secular Congressional Freethought Caucus win reelection, but 10 state senators who are openly secular – that is, they have made it publicly known that they are nonreligious – were voted into office, up from seven two years ago. There is now an all-time high of 45 openly secular state representatives nationwide, according to Mehta’s analysis. Every one of them is a Democrat.

Religious voters will certainly continue to vote their values – and for politicians that express similar views. But so, I argue, will secular voters. ■

Phil Zuckerman is Professor of Sociology and Secular Studies, Pitzer College. This article was first published in The Conversation, December 21, 2020 and is reprinted here with permission.

This Is Different: Who Stands in the Way of Progress?

By Scott Anderson

Since the summer, I have been asked by progressive leaders to examine the moment we are in and the forces that act to undermine our ability to do big things.

I try my best to avoid historical comparisons because it takes away from the fact that this period in American history is like no other. The threats to our democracy have stretched our imaginations and challenged our resolve. Fundamentally, the issue is whether and to what extent human beings and governments resolve to act in our individual or collective interests.

I start from a place of urgency. Most scientists warn that we have eight to 10 years to take major steps toward addressing the effects of man-made climate change and, as of this moment, we are not positioned to solve that big problem collectively. For a year now, the U.S. government's response to a pandemic has led to mass disruptions in society, to death and to deeper divisions. If our response to the COVID-19 pandemic disease was a stress test for how to deal with real crises, we have failed.

The first step in changing our collective resolve is to understand the forces that oppose collective action.

Over the last 20 years, many research projects, strategies and much media attention have been focused on the network of so-called "libertarian conservatives" commonly referenced as the Koch network. While much attention was paid to their long-term strategies that fundamentally changed our legislative, judicial and media landscape, little attention has been paid to other actors that now make up the more recent Trump coalition.

Several books written by various friends of mine, academics and journalists like Jane Mayer, Anne Nelson and Nancy MacLean have chronicled how a small group of conservative billionaires have changed the political landscape of America since the 1960s. What we have been slow to recognize is how this movement was changed dramatically with the 2016 nomination and election of Donald J. Trump as president.

What were once disparate efforts were quickly linked into a venn diagram of power that placed the Trump presidency at its center. This new coalition,

unlike what we traditionally think of as "conservative," does not represent the majority of Americans. What they have done is finance a successful narrative and advocacy coalition that rely on fear, resentment, and disinformation to keep America divided and thereby stymie progress.

This coalition includes:

Profiteers who claim libertarian ideals (until their industries face financial accountability), corporations and free market zealots who believe that profits equal moral good and see collectivism as a threat to their

This new coalition, unlike what we traditionally think of as "conservative," does not represent the majority of Americans. What they have done is finance a successful narrative and advocacy coalition that rely on fear, resentment, and disinformation to keep America divided and thereby stymie progress.

profits. Their spiritual leaders can be found in Gordon Gecko, the fictional character in the 1980s movie, *Wall Street*, who expressed and personified the philosophy that "greed is good." Wittingly or unwittingly, profiteers seek to create a kleptocracy. The extreme example of this can be found in the wealthy elite of the former soviet republics.

Apocalyptic religious sects that are incredibly well-financed and have been building massive education, communications and advocacy organizations for the last 40 years. These groups mix nationalism with their zealous belief in an apocalyptic end-times scenario and literal interpretation of their religious texts. Predominately Christian, they do include other

apocalyptic religions including sects within Judaism. These groups intersect with many of the profiteers and use conservative theology to justify their wealth, their collaborations with non-religious actors, and believe that the “ends justify the means.”

Propogandists that see money to be made in all the destructive crises we face. While most focus has been on the influence of FOX News and the Media Corp International empire, local media is now dominated by Sinclair Broadcasting. New conservative “news” sites are outpacing traditional media, and social media sells targeted advertising in an extremely coordinated manner in order to continue to build a community of consumers. YouTube and the algorithms of other platforms wallpaper consumers in a cocoon of narratives that build significant audiences and yield propagandists millions of dollars. Fear and resentments are tools for greater profits.

An **international criminal network** that is centered around the Russian Mob. As Sarah Kendzior wrote in *Hiding in Plain Sight*, the elite criminal network has been building for years without much daylight between Vladimir Putin and the oligarchs ruling Russia. Kendzior writes: “Many are criminals without borders who have moved from hijacking businesses to hijacking nations. Some call them fascists; I avoid

this term because being a fascist requires an allegiance to the state. To these operatives, the state is just something to sell.”

Disillusioned authoritarian foot soldiers inflamed by a changing world. Thirty years ago, the dramatic events at Waco, Ruby Ridge and Oklahoma City were the actions of a new breed of domestic terrorist organizations. All occurred before social media platforms made it easier for these actors to find one another. Today, they are inflamed by racial diversity, changing demographics, acceptance of different lifestyles, and a reliance on a fictional version of our nation’s history and greatness.

Collectively, this diverse coalition has created a powerful, concerted and pervasive opposition to progressive collective policies. We fail to recognize these beneficiaries of autocracy, theocracy and kleptocracy and respond to their intentions at the peril of the greater benefit to all persons and the values of a democratic society. ■

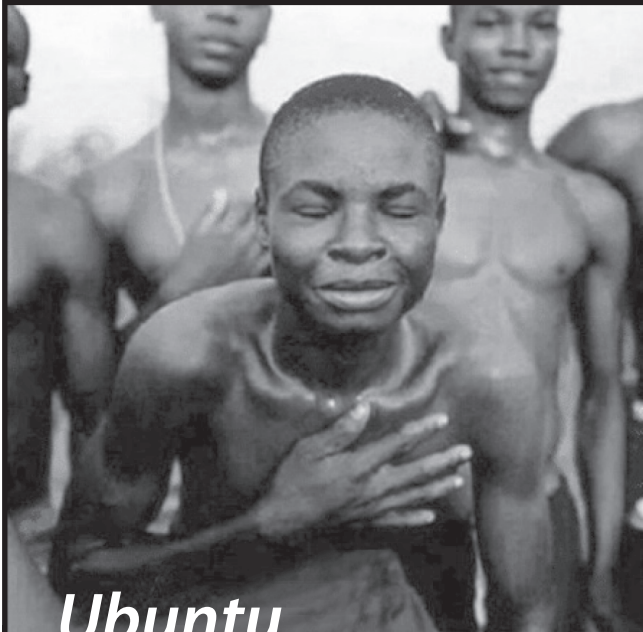
Scott Anderson is a nationally recognized political strategist and donor advisor. During the Trump years, he has driven \$380 million in investments to build progressive power and strengthen democracy through the Strategic Victory Fund.

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Ubuntu: Humanity Toward Others

By Don Durham



Ubuntu

In certain regions of South Africa, when someone does something wrong, he is taken to the center of the village and surrounded by his tribe for two days while they speak of all the good he has done. They believe each person is good, yet sometimes we make mistakes, which is really a cry for help. They unite in this ritual to encourage the person to reconnect with his true nature. The belief is that unity and affirmation have more power to change behavior than shame and punishment. This is known as Ubuntu—humanity towards others.

The accompanying image has been making the rounds on Facebook and Twitter. If your social media consumption has not increased during quarantine, even casual use may have been enough for you to have seen it. It caught my eye for longer than the typical passing meme and I read the whole thing. The underlying ethos of Ubuntu was not new to me, but it was not something I could claim to have given much regular thought – except as of late, perhaps by coincidence.

My most pleasing personal hobbies in recent years have involved back-filling the gaping hole of non-existent technological skill I didn't acquire in pursuit of an undergrad degree in Religious Education and an M. Div. The latest iteration of back-filling that hole has been satisfying the desire to learn more about how computers work, how to use them and how to write my own programs. As I began to dip my toes into learning to write computer code, I encountered the idea that I might be better off using a different computer operating system than Windows in which to practice. That led to my discovery of the Linux operating system and its various versions aimed at different user groups. Since Linux is free to end users, I started loading various versions of it on an old laptop in place of the pre-loaded Windows instructions and started playing and experimenting.

No one dips far into that pool before discovering that one of the most popular distributions of Linux is called Ubuntu. A few simple google searches reveal that the most common use of the word “Ubuntu” in America’s digital public square, is in reference to the various releases of the Ubuntu software. (Of course, in addition to a couple of Google searches, I also did an analysis of recent twitter uses of #Ubuntu and #Ubuntuconomics with code written in Python and executed on a machine running Linux Mint 20.4.)

The results are clear. If an American is using the word *Ubuntu* on social media, or in an article, it is more likely than odds of nine to one, that they are talking about an open source software tool with a rebellious streak as it is that they are referencing an egalitarian cultural ethos and humanist economic philosophy all rolled into one.

I have to admit that I cringed a bit when I first saw it. The use of the word as the name of a software tool can easily read as an appropriated trivialization of the word. Perhaps no matter how else we might read it, it is also always that too.

While I’m aware that it’s not my place to pass judgment on the propriety of uses of the word *Ubuntu*, I am trying to answer my own question about how to understand more fully any potential significance of this use. My hope is that this emergence of the word *Ubuntu* is more significant than the unavoidable cringe. I didn’t learn until writing this reflection that Linux was, in

some significant measure, the result of a philosophical rebellion against consumerism in the tech sector. It was driven by folk who were more interested in the idea that society should be pushing technology for the benefit of humanity rather than for the mere ability of a few to profit.

While later additions to the ongoing Linux project are likely written for “free” by developers who are paid to write code, (It’s just that the code they write on the job to solve their own problems is also offered freely to the rest of the user community – like sharing recipes.) most of the early, core software of the Linux operating system was written by volunteers. They were provided little to no other compensation than the professional street “cred” and the personal satisfaction of participating in such a well-known and highly regarded project.

They wanted to be a part of helping make free tools that would equip people to explore and expand their own skills and knowledge because we’re all better off when more people can do that with fewer impediments. It wasn’t that they wanted to start doing these things. The culture of computer engineering had always been inclined toward freely sharing solutions. Sharing software isn’t actually the anomaly at play in this story. The Johnny-come-lately-idea in computer software is that anyone would be allowed to write and sell software that even the purchaser couldn’t freely use after buying it. That’s the creeping virus the Linux coding community was trying to hold at bay. It is a fascinating story that pokes huge holes in the popular narrative that a proprietary financial profit motive is necessary for anything worthwhile to be accomplished.

Existence was Linux’s first challenge. It’s harder than you think to give something valuable away for free when the marketplace has been trained to mistrust anything not purchased at an inflated price. Add to that the fact that Linux had a fairly elite core of original users and has earned a reputation for being a lot of trouble to anyone who wasn’t fairly skilled with computer tech. It is not unlike what people always say about the British sport car, the MG, “They’re really fun cars if you’re enough of a mechanic to keep them running!” Linux has come a long way in not requiring elite skill to be a satisfied user. I have two religion degrees and I manage.

The Linux desktop software, Ubuntu, is one of the reasons that last bit is true. Ubuntu (among others) is a user interface that makes using Linux feel a LOT like using Windows. That fact generates a fair bit of snark from the original “command line” users who used Linux when it was like walking to school up hill in the snow both ways. However, it also means that a far

wider audience of users who inherited familiarity with Windows from their families and education now have much easier access to a whole suite of fully developed, FREE tools with which to explore productive uses of computers at far lower cost than having to purchase expensive software packages on their own.

We are all better off when more people are equipped as well as possible to access the things they need or want to do. Making that kind of access available in the worlds of computer hardware and software was part of the philosophical orientation that drove the early development teams who created Linux and left it open source for everyone else. That makes the use of the word *Ubuntu* as a one-word summary of what they’d done make more sense to me as messaging about the tools (not products) they’d offered their users (not customers). Mark Shuttleworth, the person who named the Ubuntu desktop was South African. Surely, he knew the history. It’s still not my place to pass judgment on whether it was honest homage rather than opportunistic appropriation, but I’m sitting with the question.

Neither the word nor the ideas of Ubuntu are new. They have roots in several South African languages and have had regular, focused political use in African unification and decolonization movements since the early 1950’s. Ubuntu was the theme of Nelson Mandela’s administration and was one of the organizing principles of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission led by Desmond Tutu. The idea of Ubuntu is often translated into English as, “I am because we are.”

Ubuntu is new only to Americans. After all, if anyone wants Americans to pay attention to a conversation, it had better have a profitable economic component – or disrupt one. The Linux story, while not the whole story, does seem a worthy case in which to consider our commitment to the idea that a profit-driven motive is the only feasibly scalable political economy for accomplishing worthwhile objectives or outcomes in our lives together. The economy of solidarity and mutual investment has thoroughly and persistently demonstrated merit as well.

The continuing growth of Linux’s acceptance among users, even while swimming upstream against the norms of bringing software to market, is a testimony to the fact that we can function as an economy that equips people to thrive on a large scale, without having to depend on simultaneously needing to commodify people for profit. If we will.

But will we? And, if we did, what might it look like? Not just metaphorically, but practically. What would it look like to live into a political and cultural

economy of mutual investment and relentless encouragement in practical, daily grind terms for working Americans? It's easy to see the idealism of Ubuntu in saying we're going to provide "free tools" to everyone who wants to explore and expand their knowledge and creativity – by learning to use computers. What about my nephew? He's a mechanic.

My nephew is the last person on the planet with whom I would have expected to have a philosophically reflective conversation about the potential for "Ubuntu" in American economics. So, he was the first person I got in touch with as I began to ask this necessarily more practical question. He will not be embarrassed for me to tell you that he lives his life pretty far to the ideological right on most spectra of issues and doesn't have much patience for conversations about giving stuff away for free to anybody.

I sent him a text to call me when he had a minute to talk. Within the hour, I was asking him if he'd seen the meme. He hadn't. I described it, read it, and gave a little context for the word and ideas of Ubuntu. In my description to him, I summarized it as a foundational belief that relentless encouragement and mutual investment are better strategies for making people, and communities of people, than punishment and struggle.

He agreed that he could imagine how powerfully transformative it would be to go through an actual experience like the one described in the meme. I told him I might write about this but had questions I needed to run by a new, professional mechanic to help resolve the apparent gap between how all this plays out in the digital world vs. the greasy world first. He was game.

"Is it still true that mechanics are expected to provide their own personal tools even when they work in someone else's shop?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah. No doubt. I've got over \$5,500 invested in tools. I mean, I bought a nicer toolbox than I had to at first, but I knew I would never regret it. Some shops have common tools, but they're usually crappy and they never have what you need. You gotta' bring your own if you want to get any work done. Oh, and some include a tool allowance with your pay – but it's usually like, \$50 a month."

Then I asked him, "How long did it take you to get what you really needed to do your job?"

He responded, "Couple of years really. I had some things already - bought more in school - but it was a couple of years when I was just buying tools after I started."

"So," I asked, "you spent a couple of years not really having any money left over to go out to eat, or buy

another pair of boots, or do – pretty much anything – and not really always having what you needed to do your job?"

"Yeah, I had a couple of good friends who let me borrow stuff when I needed to."

"Okay, here's my question: How much better off would EVERYONE have been if you had gotten a complete set of tools when you graduated so you could actually be a productive participant in the community on Day One? Now, the nicer toolbox is still on you buddy. We'll get you started and you can upgrade as you like but, you know, 'Here are your tools – get to work!'"

"Well, I'm not asking anybody to give me anything – but, yeah, that would've been a lot better for me."

I continued, "Of course you're not asking anyone to give you anything; but it's not just about giving YOU something! It's about how much better off we'd have all been, and faster, if we'd figured out how to equip you at the same time we educated you and had the foresight to stand around you and say, 'We're proud of what you've learned and the skills you've demonstrated and, just in case one of our cars breaks down on the way home, we want to be sure you can fix it! Here are the tools you'll need.' Sure, the cost of your education would've gone up on the front end, but it's easy to see the added cost of a set of tools as a small price to pay, and one very much worth paying. By allowing you to start from a position of thriving rather than striving, we'd have all been better able to thrive too. Yeah, you had help here and there, and I know you're grateful for it, but it was all pretty random. We should've figured out how to make sure it was 'baked in.' I'm sorry we didn't figure that out. You deserved better, and so did we."

I promised to keep him posted if the conversation became an article. He has approved the summary of our conversation above.

My earliest teacher in theology and ethics was Jack Partain, my professor at what was then Gardner-Webb College, now University. I asked him late in my senior year: "What makes it all matter? I love sitting around and talking about all of this theology, but when does it ever make a difference in the real world beyond just talking about it when we wake up in the morning and put our feet on the ground?"

He turned to face me with that intense fiery grin he sometimes savored when a student had arrived at an important question and decided to ask it. He locked eyes and said one word, "Ethics."

He let me sit in my confusion for a moment as I tried to unpack the word, then began to help. "Questions like, 'Who are we going to be in the

world? How are we going to live in the world with one another? What will we do with everything we have to live out those truths?”

I looked back, “That’s everything.”

“Exactly.” He replied.

Those are still the questions I’m asking: What are we going to do with everything we have to live in the world in the ways say we want to? How will we answer that as individuals and how will we organize our answers as communities?

The revolutionary geeks answered the question of how to stand around people in their world and give

them the tools they need to help us all thrive by creating Linux.

What will it look like for you, in your world, to start, or find, or join a revolution of standing around people like mechanics, and teachers, and caregivers, and – everyone else – to give them the tools they need to help us all thrive? ■

Don Durham is a dedicated farmer who grows food for poor people. He is also a writer, preacher, father, and a keen observer on the church and society.

A Haiku Prayer Against the Anti-Christ

(Haiku form)

God save us from these
anti-Christ who, no semblance
share, with your dear Son.

Though tens of thousands
flock to them, Christ’s words ring clear,
“I never knew you!”

Jeffress disavows
candidates who follow Christ’s
“Sermon on the Mount.”

Trump, whom Jeffress loves,
denies in word and deed the
dying Savior’s creed.

Brutal force, their creed;
“Do unto others ten times
what they do to you.”

They pray, “Our kingdom
come, our will be done on earth,
now and forever.”

--by James D. Rapp published in
a book of poetry, *The Politic Poet*

Hard Truth about Hateful Faith and Our Endangered World

By Wendell Griffen

“You can’t handle the truth!” People familiar with the 1992 motion picture *A Few Good Men* recall that angry retort shouted by Colonel Nathan Jessep (played by actor Jack Nicholson) in response to the “I want the truth!” cross-examination demand from Lieutenant Daniel Kaffee (played by Tom Cruise) during the dramatic finale of that movie

Whether you can handle it or not, I’m going to share some hard truth that people need to face given the January 6, 2021 insurrection and coup attempt by pro-Trump extremists who invaded the US Capitol, an action that has claimed the lives of five (5) persons thus far and injuries to many others. Buckle up.

In 2016, Donald John Trump was elected president of the United States as the candidate of the Republican Party after receiving overwhelming support from a voting bloc known as “conservative evangelical Christians.” Although those voters have claimed for decades that they stand for “family values,” they campaigned and voted for Trump knowing his serial marital history (three marriages) and abuse of women (misogyny). They did so weeks after Trump bragged that his maleness, wealth and celebrity enabled and entitled him to sexually assault and verbally abuse women.

Some people have been astounded that Trump, whose adult history is characterized by open disdain for service to anyone or anything other than himself and who has shown no outward interest in faith and obedience to any religious belief, has been embraced by U.S. voters who claim to be “conservative evangelical Christians.” They may wonder why those voters supported Trump after he pardoned former Arizona sheriff Joe Arpaio, who was convicted of criminal contempt of court when he violated a court order to stop racially profiling Latinos.

Why didn’t “conservative evangelical Christian” support for Trump drop after he called Haiti and nations in Africa “shithole countries”? Why didn’t Trump’s support decline from people who previously viewed Bill Clinton unfit to remain in office after Trump’s personal attorney, Michael Cohen, revealed that Trump paid him to hide news of Trump’s tryst with a former erotic film actress named

Stormy Daniels? Why didn’t their support fall after Trump’s administration insulted people in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria in 2017? Why did “evangelical Christian conservatives continue supporting Trump after he publicly called white supremacists “nice people” when their Unite the Right event in Charlottesville, Virginia, led to the death of Heather Meyers? Why do people who claim to be “conservative evangelical Christians” and revere Jesus support Donald Trump when his administration separated thousands of children from their parents at the U.S. southern border, failed to adequately track where refugee children have been taken, and refused the children decent housing, sanitation and loving care? Why do

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77 percent of white evangelical Protestants approve of Trump’s job performance (according to a recent poll from the Public Religion Research Institute), including half who strongly approve?

The answer to these questions is as clear as it is unpleasant. Trump enjoys good standing with “conservative evangelical Christians” **because** his racism and white supremacy, patriarchy and sexism (including discrimination against women and girls, homophobia and transphobia), fear and bigotry towards immigrants (xenophobia), and support for Zionist nationalism (regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the Middle East) fits their notion of “religious liberty” and the American empire.

In 1948, South Carolina Governor Strom Thurmond and southern Democrats known as “Dixiecrats” bolted

from the Democratic National Convention because they opposed policies of racial integration promoted by Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota and President Harry Truman (who had issued an executive order to desegregate the U.S. armed services). In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed racial segregation in public education in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. White evangelical Protestants – “conservative evangelical Christians” – sided with Strom Thurmond and the segregationists against desegregation. In doing so, they followed the tradition of their predecessors who supported slavery, opposed Reconstruction-era policies to remedy the effects of slavery, and gave open support to the Ku Klux Klan and other domestic terrorist groups.

After 1964 (the year Congress enacted and President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act that officially outlawed racial segregation and reversed the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*), white voters in the states of the former Confederacy who call themselves “evangelical Christian conservatives” began identifying in growing numbers with the Republican Party. Those voters objected to desegregation and increased participation by black and other non-white voters in elections. They opposed efforts to shape public policy in more inclusive and equitable ways.

The presidential campaigns of Barry Goldwater (1964), Richard Nixon (1968 and 1972), Ronald Reagan (1980 and 1984), George H. Bush (1988), George H.W. Bush (2000 and 2004), and Donald Trump (2016) were built on overt and subtle appeals to the fears, prejudices, perceived grievances and other views of “conservative evangelical Christians.” Those predominantly white and Protestant voters in the U.S. South and Midwest have become more politically active in their convictions about whether women are entitled to decide whether to have abortions without governmental interference. They have opposed protecting the voting rights of persons of color. They have objected to governmental regulation and protection of the air, soil, water and communities from toxins.

They oppose federal, state and local regulation of firearms in the United States while blindly cheering U.S. military interventions around the world. And “white evangelical Christian conservatives” have refused to recognize, let alone protect, the humanity and right of persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) to marry, work, parent and exercise other aspects of freedom without discrimination by the government.

It is a mistake to disregard or understate the role of white supremacy and white religious nationalism in

Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign. White supremacists and religious nationalists fumed, bristled and schemed for eight years during the Barack Obama presidency. They were mortified when Obama, a black man whose middle name was Hussein, defeated John McCain, a white, decorated veteran of the Vietnam War, son and grandson of veterans, and a recognized national security and defense hawk. They were shocked again when Obama’s signature first term initiative, access to affordable health care, became law thanks to the strong and shrewd legislative maneuvering of Nancy Pelosi, the first woman to serve as Speaker of the House of Representatives, a wife, mother, and grandmother who is a devout Catholic and proponent of reproductive freedom for women.

When Obama was able to nominate and secure confirmation of two pro-choice women on the Supreme Court (Justices Elena Kagan and Sonya Sotomayor who is also the first person of Latino ancestry to join the Court), the bastion of white supremacy, patriarchy and religious nationalism suffered yet another shock. These things happened before the sudden death

White supremacists and religious nationalists fumed, bristled and schemed for eight years during the Barack Obama presidency. They were mortified when Obama, a black man whose middle name was Hussein, defeated John McCain,

of Justice Antonin Scalia in February 2015. Scalia was the Court’s leading conservative. He led the fight to criticize the landmark decision in *Roe v. Wade* that recognized the right of women to choose whether to have abortions. Scalia also opposed efforts to protect LGBTQI persons from discrimination, opposed civil rights legislation to protect voting rights of groups historically discriminated against on account of color, and authored a Supreme Court decision that limited the power of state and local governments to regulate handguns. So “conservative evangelical Christians” smugly cheered with Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, the Senate Majority Leader, refused to allow the hold confirmation hearings and vote on whether to confirm Judge Merrick Garland, Obama’s nominee to succeed Scalia.

The hard truth is that “conservative evangelical Christians” – whom I term “the Hateful Faithful” – are the dominant force behind Trump’s xenophobic, rac-

ist and otherwise questionable policies. The Hateful Faithful fiercely support Trump because they crave the power of his office to achieve their imperialistic and authoritarian aims.

In that sense, Donald Trump's presidency fulfills dangers Cornel West identified in a book titled *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004). Writing during the first term of President George W. Bush, West predicted our current situation:

Just as demagogic and antidemocratic fundamentalisms have gained far too much prominence in both Israel and the Islamic world, so too has a fundamentalist strain of Christianity gained far too much power in our political system, and in the hearts and minds of citizens. This Christian fundamentalism is exercising an undue influence over our government policies, both in the Middle East crisis and in the domestic sphere, and is violating fundamental principles enshrined in the Constitution; it is also providing support and "cover" for the imperialist aims of empire. The three dogmas that are leading to the imperial devouring of democracy in America – free market fundamentalism, aggressive militarism, and escalating authoritarianism – are often justified by the religious rhetoric of this Christian fundamentalism. And perhaps most ironically – and sadly – this fundamentalism is subverting the most profound, seminal teachings of Christianity, those being that we should live with humility, love our neighbors, and do unto others as we would have them do unto us... The battle for the soul of American democracy is, in large part, a battle for the soul of American Christianity, because the dominant forms of Christian fundamentalism are a threat to the tolerance and openness necessary for sustaining any democracy...

The basic distinction between Constantinian Christianity and prophetic Christianity is crucial for the future of American democracy. America is undeniably a highly religious country, and the dominant religion by far is Christianity, and much of American Christianity is a form of Constantinian Christianity. In American Christendom, the fundamental battle between democracy and empire is echoed in the struggle between this Constantinian Christianity and prophetic Christianity [*Democracy Matters*, pp. 146-146].

As West correctly observed, "Constantinian Christianity has always been at odds with the prophetic

legacy of Jesus Christ... The corruption of a faith fundamentally based on tolerance and compassion by the strong arm of imperial authoritarianism invested Christianity with an insidious schizophrenia with which it has been battling ever since." In the United States, the schizophrenia West identified allowed what he termed "strains of Constantinianism" to be "woven into the fabric of America's Christian identity from the start." And West added this observation:

Most American Constantinian Christians are unaware of their imperialistic identity because they do not see the parallel between the Roman empire that put Jesus to death and the American empire they celebrate. As long as they can worship freely and pursue the American dream, they see the American government as a force for good and American imperialism as a desirable force for spreading that good. They proudly profess their allegiance to the flag and the cross not realizing that just as the cross was a bloody indictment of the Roman empire, it is a powerful critique of the

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American empire, and they fail to acknowledge that the cozy relation between their Christian leaders and imperial American rulers may mirror the intimate ties between the religious leaders and imperial Roman rulers who crucified their Savior [p.150].

Although I heartily recommend *Democracy Matters* (and especially Chapter 5 which is titled "The Crisis of Christian Identity in America") to anyone interested in a thorough analysis of people I call the "Hateful Faithful," I respectfully disagree with Cornel West on one issue. The elections of Ronald Reagan, George H. Bush, George W. Bush and Donald Trump conclusively prove that American Constantinian Christians are quite aware of their imperialistic identity. After all, Trump's campaign slogan – "Make America Great Again" – is

an explicit adoration of empire.

We need not quibble about whether Franklyn Graham, Jerry Falwell, Jr., Robert Jeffress, Mike Huckabee and other nationally known Constantinian Christians “see the parallel between the Roman empire that put Jesus to death and the American empire they celebrate.” That does not mean they are “unaware of their imperialistic identity.” Instead, Constantinian Christians reject the prophetic identity of Jesus. As Cornel West observed, “Constantinian Christians fail to appreciate their violation of Christian love and justice because Constantinian Christianity in America places such a strong emphasis on personal conversion, individual piety, and philanthropic service and has lost its fervor for the suspicion of worldly authorities and for doing justice in the service of the most vulnerable among us, which are central to the faith”[p.150].

The Hateful Faithful are heretics. Constantinian Christianity is now (and has always been) heretical to the gospel of Jesus. At best, Hateful Faithful claims of allegiance to Jesus are ill-conceived. At worst, their claims of allegiance to Jesus are fraudulent. Any claim that Jesus is the center of one’s faith and living – by people who condone bigotry against immigrants, racism, sexism, murdering political enemies, denial of access to healthcare services to people who are needy, and who condone mistreatment of vulnerable persons – is beyond unpersuasive. Such a claim of allegiance to Jesus amounts to moral and ethical nonsense.

People who cheered the murder of Iranian General Qassim Suliemani are not followers of Jesus because nothing in the teachings of Jesus supports murdering enemies. There is no “Blessed are the assassins” clause in the Beatitudes. People who support policies that forcibly separate asylum-seeking parents from their children and that create and operate concentration camps where the children have been denied loving care, basic hygiene, and comfortable shelter, are not followers of Jesus. Jesus taught (at the end of Matthew 25) that how one treats immigrants shows whether one knows the Son of God.

The hard truth is that the Hateful are Faithful, but not to Jesus. Like Constantine, they have hijacked the gospel of Jesus and are fraudulently using Christian identity as a disguise for white supremacy, patriarchy, bigotry and discrimination, authoritarianism, greed, militarism and lust for empire. Donald Trump, not Jesus, is their Savior. That is why I agree with what Cornel West wrote in *Democracy Matters* near the end of his analysis about the crisis of Christian identity in America:

To see the Gospel of Jesus Christ bastardized by

imperial Christians and pulverized by Constantinian believers and then exploited by nihilistic elites of the American empire makes my blood boil... I do not want to be numbered among those who sold their souls for a mess of pottage – who surrendered their democratic Christian identity for a comfortable place at the table of the American empire while, like Lazarus, the least of these cried out and I was too intoxicated with worldly power and might to hear, beckon, and heed their cries. [p.171-172]

I do not want to be numbered among the Hateful Faithful. Neither does Jesus, judging from what he declared near the end of the Sermon on the Mount:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down

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and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name.” Then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoer.” [Matthew 5:15-23]. ■

*Wendell Griffen is a circuit court judge in Little Rock, Arkansas where he is also and pastor of New Millennium Church . He is author of *The Fierce Urgency of Prophetic Hope* (Judson Press) and has written for and is a member of the board of *Christian Ethics Today*. He can be followed at wendellgriffen.blogspot.com*

How a Muslim Beggar Taught Me about Dignity

By Robert P. Sellers

Perhaps I had grown too accustomed to seeing people dig through the garbage containers at the edge of the street in my residential neighborhood in Semarang, Indonesia. Then, one day I prepared a sermon for the small English-language congregation I had been asked to lead.

Thinking that the story of a poor beggar lying at the gate of an apathetic, self-involved rich man could be strikingly suitable for the typical congregation of middle class Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Australian, Indian, German, French, Dutch, Canadian, American and Indonesian worshippers, I chose as my topic Jesus's parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus from Luke 16. But how surprised I was when driving home to notice a man wearing a filthy, torn loincloth, digging through a garbage bin only 100 meters from my house.

Feeling pricks of conscience as I drove past him that afternoon, I circled the block and stopped at a neighborhood warung — a food stall with canvas walls surrounding simple wooden tables, crude benches and a tiny cooking area. There, I bought a serving of rice, wrapped in a banana leaf, along with a plastic bag of tea secured with a rubber band, and took them back to the man I couldn't ignore. Rolling down the car window, I extended the small meal toward him. He approached slowly, taking my offering without expressing any appreciation. But I thought, "Well, that's okay; I've not neglected him; I've carried out my moral duty."

For the next several days, however, this beggar remained near our gate. Every afternoon, I would return to the warung and would buy him another meal, each one bigger than the last. I would park my car, get out and try to engage him in conversation; but he was undoubtedly one of the walking wounded — seriously impaired from a life of poor nutrition, exposure to the elements, chronic illness and bad treatment by others — so he didn't talk to me.

Then one day I had a brainstorm. Or maybe it was an epiphany. Taking this man by the elbow, I led him slowly around the corner to the warung. I parted the tent flaps, and we went inside and sat at a table with other patrons — university students and civil servants on their way home from school or work. They looked up, startled by what this strange foreigner had done. I purchased two large meals with hot tea and watched

him sit there with rather uncommon dignity. Naked except for his ragged waistcloth and with matted hair, he ate silently, glazed eyes seeming to look at nothing in particular.

This man, someone the average citizen of my city would have called an orang gila (crazy person), was almost certainly not a Christian. He likely was born into a Muslim family in a poor Central Java neighborhood and probably was taken to prayers at the local mosque by his father and mother, who never imagined their son would one day live on the streets. But the social stigma of his homelessness, his weakened physical and mental condition, and his desperate poverty had long ago made it impossible for him to practice the religion of his childhood.

Recalling this profound experience in Central Java many years ago, I am reminded of the importance of affirming the dignity of others, even — and perhaps most especially — those who are different from ourselves.

Yet, at the table that day, this Muslim beggar taught me a lesson about human dignity and compassion. In that holy moment, surrounded by the "sacred" elements of rice and tea, I felt very close to God. Mysteriously, after sitting alongside that stranger for a most unusual meal, I never saw him in our neighborhood again. It was as if he simply disappeared. For me, although it sounds illogical, he was — as Mother Teresa often expressed it — Christ in the guise of the poor.

Recalling this profound experience in Central Java many years ago, I am reminded of the importance of affirming the dignity of others, even — and perhaps most especially — those who are different from ourselves.

I don't discover beggars desperately digging through the garbage can at my home in America, however. There are no physically, mentally and emotionally damaged persons who canvas my quiet, privileged

neighborhood, hoping to discover a discarded treasure no one wants. But if I drive a few miles to another part of my city, I may find someone in a similarly hopeless situation. Some of these people live with their extended families in very old houses not much larger than my outdoor storage shed. Others stand near the exit to the parking lot at Walmart, hoping to attract attention and help. They hold up signs at traffic lights where many drivers line up cars — windows and doors secured, air conditioners blasting away in the Texas heat, surround-sound stereos playing a soothing melody or upbeat lyric to numb the concerns of the day.

I catch myself avoiding eye contact with the people who are soliciting help at Walmart or the town's favorite traffic stops. I glance at their hand-scrawled signs and quickly look away, suspicious that this person is working a con, that he doesn't really need a bus ticket to Amarillo, that she doesn't really have three kids she can't feed, that "God bless you" on their cardboard signs is a gimmick rather than the poignant nudging of the Holy Spirit.

Occasionally, as I pull away from them in my comfortable sedan, I remember the lesson about giving dignity that I learned in Semarang, Indonesia. Sadly, though, I most often don't roll down my window to extend a gift, and I have never stopped my car to get out for a conversation.

Has the lesson that dawned so brightly in my Central Java neighborhood dimmed with the passage of years? Or, have I simply become cynical and self-centered after living in America again for the past 25 years?

My story centers on granting dignity to the poorest of the poor; but I know I should offer that gift to everyone I meet. I must give dignity to those people online who push back against my political views, because these friends and even strangers are the Facebook "enemies" whom God calls me to love (Matthew 5:44), despite our ideological disagreements. I have to be courteous toward those who are much younger or older, differently-experienced or less formally educated than I — avoiding any hint of arrogance or superiority based upon my age, resumé or degrees — knowing that when I do not self-promote, I am reflecting the one who said he was "humble in heart" (Matthew 11:29). I should always act respectfully toward women, forsaking my culture's preferential treatment of men, because I recognize that women and men are created as equals in God's image (Genesis 1:27). I need to honor persons who follow other religious paths, recalling that the ministry of Jesus was inspired by how God had cared for a widow of Zarephath and the Syrian leper (Luke 4:25-27). I am compelled to value those who are racially different than I, knowing that because I am "in Christ," there

can be no distinction in the way I treat them.

My commitment to Jesus calls me to recognize my connection to and my oneness with others in the new "kin-dom" God desires (Galatians 3:28).

I can't say that the woman who interjects herself into my thoughts as I finish shopping at Walmart, or the man who catches my attention as I go to my next appointment, are Christ in the surprising guise of the poor. Maybe not. Perhaps they really are running a scam. All I can know for sure is what Jesus said: When I treat the least of these with compassion and charity, I am ministering to Jesus himself (Matthew 25:40).

Perhaps this mystifying identification of even the "least" of human beings with the one Christians call divine can be clarified by the doctrine of the incarnation.

Diana Eck writes: "Incarnation means that God finds us, and we find God, in the human faces of one another and in the human fabric of our lives." In the spirit of the incarnation, Methodist lay leader Pauline Webb, in a 1983 sermon at the World Council of Churches in Vancouver, asserted that "to name Jesus Christ as the

Perhaps this mystifying identification of even the "least" of human beings with the one Christians call divine can be clarified by the doctrine of the incarnation.

focal point of the meeting of divine and human nature means to me that through him all human life has been dignified."

This explains why I felt very near to God as I sat with the beggar near my gate, and it causes me to rethink how I should respond to those in need whom I encounter today. It helps us to understand how people we sometimes view as "the least" are really Jesus in the guise of the poor. It convinces us that because all people were elevated when Jesus became the human face of God, we must therefore offer to everyone the gift of dignity. ■

Rob Sellers is professor of theology and missions emeritus at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon Seminary in Abilene, Texas. He is the immediate past chair of the board of the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago. He and his wife, Janie, served a quarter century as missionary teachers in Indonesia. They have two children and five grandchildren.

Black Men Have the Shortest Lifespans of Any Americans. This Theory Helps Explain Why.

By Joseph Singer, Nadia Sussman, Nina Martin and Akilah Johnson ProPublica

The unrelenting stress of fighting systemic racism can alter a body's normal functioning until it starts to wear down. The theory, known as John Henryism, helps explain racial health disparities.

COVID-19 has killed many young Black men with deadly efficiency. When ProPublica reporters began collecting their stories and speaking to health experts to understand why, their efforts led them to a little-known body of research that takes its name from one of the most enduring symbols of Black American resilience.

Sherman James is a social epidemiologist who has spent the past four decades exploring why Black men have higher rates of diseases that lead to shorter lifespans than all other Americans.

His conclusion is that the constant stress of striving to succeed in the face of social inequality and structural racism can cause lasting physical damage.

"The stress is enormous. And people, people don't give up," James said. "That persistence, working twice as hard, over time can really impair multiple physiological systems."

Who Was John Henry?

(The victims) were pillars of their communities and families, and they are not replaceable. To understand why COVID-19 killed so many young Black men, you need to know the legend of John Henry.

As the legend goes, John Henry was a steel-driving man who defeated a steam-powered drill and died with a hammer in his hand. The folktale celebrates one man's victory against seemingly insurmountable odds. But it holds another, harsher truth: his determination and strength are also what killed him.

The John Henry of contemporary social theory is a man striving to get ahead in an unequal society. The effort of confronting that machine, day in and day out, leads to stress so corrosive that it physically changes bodies, causing Black men to age quicker, become sicker and die younger than nearly any other U.S. demographic group.

"It's this striving to make something of themselves ... to live their lives with dignity and purpose and to be successful against extraordinary circumstances," James said.

What Is John Henryism?

Black people have much higher rates of hypertension, obesity, diabetes and strokes than white people do, and they develop those chronic conditions up to 10 years earlier. Studies link these health problems to stress. The unique, unrelenting strain caused by racism can alter a body's normal functioning until it starts to wear down. John Henrys, who battle with an unequal system as they try to get ahead in life, bear the consequences in their bodies. "The stress," James said, "is going to be far more overwhelming than it has a human right to be."

The folktale celebrates one man's victory against seemingly insurmountable odds. But it holds another, harsher truth: his determination and strength are also what killed him.

The stress-linked underlying conditions that Black people develop younger are the very ones that make people more vulnerable to the worst outcomes from the coronavirus. When the Brookings Institution examined COVID-19 deaths by race, Black people were dying at roughly the same rate as white people more than a decade older.

"They could have done so much more had the struggle not been so intense," James said. "They were cut down too soon." ■

This article was first published on Dec. 22, 2020 in ProPublica and is reprinted here with permission. Joseph Singer is a video editor at ProPublica. Nadia Sussman is a video journalist at ProPublica. Nina Martin is a reporter covering sex and gender issues. She joined ProPublica in 2013 and is based in Berkeley, California.

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A Journal of Christian Ethics

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OUR CONTACT INFORMATION

Pat Anderson Cell (863) 207-2050
P.O. Box 1238 E-mail Drpatanderson@gmail.com
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