

THE CRISIS OF CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN AMERICA

Our solutions and decisions are relative, because they are related to the fragmentary and frail measure of our faith. We have not found and shall not find—until Christ comes again—a Christian in history whose faith so ruled his life that every thought was brought into subjection to it and every moment and place was for him in the kingdom of God. Each one has encountered the mountain he could not move, the demon he could not exorcise. . . . All our faith is fragmentary, though we do not all have the same fragments of faith.

—H. RICHARD NIEBUHR, *Christ and Culture* (1951)

I must take the responsibility for how, mark my word, *how* I react to the forces that impinge upon my life, forces that are not responsive to my will, my desire, my ambition, my dream, my hope—forces that don't know that I'm here. But I know I'm here. And I decide whether I will say yes, or no, and make it hold. This indeed is the free man, and this is anticipated in the genius of the dogma of freedom as a manifestation of the soul of America, born in what to me is one of the greatest of the great experiments in human relations.

—HOWARD THURMAN, *America in Search of a Soul* (1976)

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The religious threats to democratic practices abroad are much easier to talk about than those at home. Just as demagogic and antidemocratic fundamentalisms have gained 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. Therefore, even as we turn a critical eye on the fundamentalisms at play in the Middle East, the genuine democrats and democratic Christians among us must unite in opposition to this hypocritical, antidemocratic fundamentalism at home. 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. Yet the best of

American Christianity has contributed greatly to preserving and expanding American democracy. The basic distinction between Constantinian Christianity and prophetic Christianity is crucial for the future of American democracy.

Surveys have shown that 80 percent of Americans call themselves Christians, 72 percent expect the Second Coming of Christ, and 40 percent say they speak to the Christian God on intimate terms at least twice a week. 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.

This battle between prophetic Christians and Constantinian Christians goes back to the first centuries of the Christian movement that emerged out of Judaism. The Roman emperor Constantine's incorporation of Christianity within the empire gave Christianity legitimacy and respectability but robbed it of the prophetic fervor of Jesus and the apocalyptic fire of that other Jew-turned-Christian named Paul. Until Constantine converted to Christianity in AD 312 and decriminalized it with the Edict of Milan in 313, and his successor Theodosius I made Christianity the official religion of the empire, the Christian movement had been viciously persecuted by the imperial Romans, primarily because the growing popularity of the Christian message of humility, and of equality among men, was understood as a threat to Roman imperial rule.

Jesus was so brutally executed by the Roman empire—crucifixion being the empire's most horrific and terrifying tactic of pun-

ishing offenders to its rule—precisely because his preaching of the coming of the kingdom of God was seen by the Romans as dangerously subversive of the authoritarianism and militarism of the Roman state. Ironically, Jesus's message of love and justice promoted a separation of his prophetic witness from Caesar's authority—"render unto Caesar what is Caesar's," Christ said. Yet the nihilistic imperialism of the Romans was so power-hungry that it couldn't tolerate the growing popularity of the Christian sects. When the growth of the religion couldn't be stopped, the Roman empire co-opted it. With Constantine's conversion, a terrible co-joining of church and state was institutionalized from which the religion and many of its victims, especially Jews, have suffered ever since. Constantinian Christianity has always been at odds with the prophetic legacy of Jesus Christ. Constantine himself seems to have converted to Christianity partly out of political strategy and imperial exigency, and then proceeded to use the cloak of Christianity for his own purposes of maintaining power.

As the Christian church became increasingly corrupted by state power, religious rhetoric was often used to justify imperial aims and conceal the prophetic heritage of Christianity. Immediately after his conversion, Constantine targeted numerous Christian sects for annihilation—such as the Gnostics and other groups that questioned the books of the Old Testament—as he consolidated power by creating one imperial version of Christianity. 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. This terrible merger of church and state has

been behind so many of the church's worst violations of Christian love and justice—from the barbaric crusades against Jews and Muslims, to the horrors of the Inquisition and the ugly bigotry against women, people of color, and gays and lesbians.

This same religious schizophrenia has been a constant feature of American Christianity. The early American branch of the Christian movement—the Puritans—consisted of persecuted victims of the British empire in search of liberty and security. On the one hand, they laid the foundations for America's noble anti-imperialist struggle against the British empire. On the other hand, they enacted the imperialist subordination of Amerindians. Their democratic sensibilities were intertwined with their authoritarian sentiments. The American democratic experiment would have been inconceivable without the fervor of Christians, yet strains of Constantinianism were woven into the fabric of America's Christian identity from the start. Constantinian strains of American Christianity have been on the wrong side of so many of our social troubles, such as the dogmatic justification of slavery and the parochial defense of women's inequality. It has been the prophetic Christian tradition, by contrast, that has so often pushed for social justice.

When conservative Christians argue today for state-sponsored religious schools, when they throw their tacit or more overt support behind antiabortion zealots or homophobic crusaders who preach hatred (a few have even killed in the name of their belief), they are being Constantinian Christians. These 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. These energies are rendered marginal to their Christian identity.

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 that 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 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.

I have no doubt that most of these American Constantinian Christians are sincere in their faith and pious in their actions. But they are relatively ignorant of the crucial role they play in sponsoring American imperial ends. Their understanding of American history is thin and their grasp of Christian history is spotty, which leaves them vulnerable to manipulation by Christian leaders and misinformation by imperial rulers. The Constantinian Christian support of the pervasive disinvestment in urban centers and cutbacks in public education and health care, as well as their emphatic defense of the hard-line policies of the Israeli government, has

much to do with the cozy alliance of Constantinian Christian leaders with the political elites beholden to corporate interests who provide shelter for cronyism. In short, they sell their precious souls for a mess of imperial pottage based on the false belief that they are simply being true to the flag and the cross. The very notion that the prophetic legacy of the grand victim of the Roman empire—Jesus Christ—requires critique of and resistance to American imperial power hardly occurs to them.

These American Constantinian Christians must ask themselves, Does not the vast concentration of so much power and might breed arrogance and hubris? Do not the Old Testament prophets and teachings of Jesus suggest, at the least, a suspicion of such unrivaled and unaccountable wealth and status? Are not empires the occasion of idolatry run amok? Most Christians, including Constantinian ones, are appalled by the ugly AIDS epidemic in Africa—thirty million now—and around the world (forty million). Why has the response of the American empire to this crisis been abysmal? Doesn't the interest of drug companies and their influence on the U.S. government hamper our ability to discover or make available cheap drugs for our ailing fellow human beings? Is it not obvious that the U.S. response would be much different if AIDS victims were white heterosexual upper-middle-class men in Europe or America? Must Christians respond solely through private charities in this disastrous emergency? The response to the AIDS crisis is but one example of the moral callousness of imperial rulers that should upset any Christian. Were not subjugated Jews and later persecuted Christians in the early Roman empire treated in such inhumane and unacceptable ways?

In criticizing the Constantinianism in American Christianity, however, we must not lose sight of the crucial role of prophetic Christianity as a force for democratic good in our history. The values engendered by Christian belief were crucial in fueling first the democratic energy out of which the early religious settlers founded nascent democratic projects and then the indignation with the abuses of the British empire that drove the American Revolution. And the Founders took great pains to establish guarantees of religious freedom in the Constitution out of a deep conviction about the indispensable role of religion in civic life. The most influential social movements for justice in America have been led by prophetic Christians: the abolitionist, women's suffrage, and trade-union movements in the nineteenth century and the civil rights movement in the twentieth century. Though the Constantinian Christianity that has gained so much influence today is undermining the fundamental principles of our democracy regarding the proper role of religion in the public life of a democracy, the prophetic strains in American Christianity have done battle with imperialism and social injustice all along and represent the democratic ideal of religion in public life. This prophetic Christianity adds a moral fervor to our democracy that is a very good thing. It also holds that we must embrace those outside of the Christian faith and act with empathy toward them. This prophetic Christianity is an ecumenical force for good, and if we are to revitalize the democratic energies of the country, we must reassert the vital legitimacy of this prophetic Christianity in our public life, such as the principles of public service, care for the poor, and separation of church and state that this Christianity demands. And we must oppose the

intrusions of the fundamentalist Christianity that has so flagrantly violated those same democratic principles.

Most American Christians have little knowledge of many of the most powerful voices in the rich prophetic tradition in American Christianity. They are unfamiliar with the theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, who in his *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907) and numerous other influential books was the primary voice of the Social Gospel movement at the turn of the last century. As the industrial engines of the American empire ramped up, leading to the excesses of the Gilded Age, this theological movement perceived that industrial capitalism and its attendant urbanization brought with them inherent social injustices. Its adherents spoke out against the abuse of workers by managements that were not sufficiently constrained by either morality or government regulation. As Rauschenbusch eloquently wrote:

Individual sympathy and understanding has been our chief reliance in the past for overcoming the differences between the social classes. The feelings and principles implanted by Christianity have been a powerful aid in that direction. But if this sympathy diminishes by the widening of the social chasm, what hope have we?

With the flourishing of American industrialism, our society was becoming corrupted by capitalist greed, Rauschenbusch warned, and Christians had a duty to combat the consequent injustices.

Most American Christians have forgotten or have never learned

about the pioneering work of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement, which she founded in 1933 during the Great Depression to bring relief to the homeless and the poor. Day set up a House of Hospitality in the slums of New York City and founded the newspaper *Catholic Worker* because she believed that

by fighting for better conditions, by crying out unceasingly for the rights of the workers, of the poor, of the destitute—the rights of the worthy and the unworthy poor . . . we can to a certain extent change the world; we can work for the oasis, the little cell of joy and peace in a harried world.

Some of these prophetic Christians have been branded radicals and faced criminal prosecution. During the national trauma of the Vietnam War, the Jesuit priests and brothers Philip and Daniel Berrigan led antiwar activities, with Daniel founding the group Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam. The brothers organized sit-ins and teach-ins against the war and led many protests, notoriously breaking into Selective Service offices twice to remove draft records, the second time dowsing them with napalm and lighting them on fire. "The burning of paper, instead of children," Daniel wrote in explanation of their action, "when will you say no to this war?" Both brothers served time in prison for those break-ins but went on to engage in civil disobedience protests against later U.S. military interventions and the nuclear arms race.

After a lifetime of eloquent Christian activism, the Reverend William Sloan Coffin should be better known to Americans today.

Chaplain of Yale University during the Vietnam War, he spoke out strongly and early against the injustice of that incursion and went on to become president of SANE/FREEZE, the largest peace and justice organization in the United States, and minister of Riverside Church in Manhattan. The author of many powerful books, including *The Courage to Love* and *A Passion for the Possible*, he once said in an interview:

I wonder if we Americans don't also have something that we should contribute, as it were, to the burial grounds of the world, something that would make the world a safer place. I think there is something in us. It is an attitude more than an idea. It lives less in the American mind than under the American skin. That is the notion that we are not only the most powerful nation in the world, which we certainly are, but that we are also the most virtuous. I think this pride is our bane and I think it is so deep-seated that it is going to take the sword of Christ's truth to do the surgical operation.

He also presciently said, "No nation, ours or any other, is well served by illusions of righteousness. All nations make decisions based on self-interest and then defend them in the name of morality."

Although Martin Luther King Jr. is well known, he is often viewed as an isolated icon on a moral pedestal rather than as one grand wave in an ocean of black prophetic Christians who constitute the long tradition that gave birth to him. There is David Walker,

the free-born antislavery protester, who in 1829 published his famous *Appeal*, a blistering call for justice in which, as a devout Christian, he writes:

I call upon the professing Christians, I call upon the philanthropist, I call upon the very tyrant himself, to show me a page of history, either sacred or profane, on which a verse can be found, which maintains, that the Egyptians heaped the *insupportable insult* upon the children of Israel, by telling them that they were not of the *human family*. Can the whites deny this charge? Have they not, after having reduced us to the deplorable condition of slaves under the feet, held us up as descending originally from the tribes of Monkeys or Orang-Outangs? O! my God! I appeal to every man of feeling—is not this insupportable? Is it not heaping the most gross insult upon our miseries, because they have got us under their feet and we cannot help ourselves? Oh! Pity us we pray thee, Lord Jesus, Master.

There is the deeply religious Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the anti-lynching activist who wrote shockingly of the gruesome truths of that peculiarly American form of terrorism in her pamphlet *A Red Record*, and who went on to found the women's club movement, the first civic activist organization for African American women. More Americans should remember Benjamin E. Mays. Ordained into the Baptist ministry, he served as the dean of the School of Religion at

Howard University and held the presidency of Morehouse College for twenty-five years, where he inspired Martin Luther King Jr. Mays helped launch the civil rights movement by participating in sit-ins in restaurants in Atlanta and was a leader in the fight against segregated education. There is the towering theologian Howard Thurman, also ordained into the Baptist ministry, dean of Rankin Chapel at Howard University and pastor of the first major U.S. interracial congregation in San Francisco, who traveled to India and met with Mahatma Gandhi and whose book *Jesus and the Disinherited* provided some of the philosophical foundation for the nonviolent civil rights movement.

The righteous fervor of this black prophetic Christian tradition is rich with ironies. When African slaves creatively appropriated the Christian movement under circumstances in which it was illegal to read, write, or worship freely, the schizophrenia of American Christianity was intensified. Some prophetic white Christians became founders of the abolitionist movement in partnership with ex-slaves, while other white Christians resorted to a Constantinian justification of the perpetuation of slavery. One's stand on slavery became a crucial litmus test to measure prophetic and Constantinian Christianity in America. The sad fact is that on this most glaring hypocrisy within American Christianity and democracy, most white Christians—and their beloved churches—were colossal failures based on prophetic criteria.

The vast majority of white American Christians supported the evil of slavery—and they did so often in the name of Jesus. When Abraham Lincoln declared in his profound Second Inaugural Address that both sides in the Civil War prayed to the same God—

"Neither party expected for the war, the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. . . . Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other"—he captured the horrible irony of this religious schizophrenia for the nation.

Black prophetic Christians—from Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King Jr.—have eloquently reminded us of the radical fissure between prophetic and Constantinian Christianity, and King's stirring Christian conviction and prophetic rhetoric fueled the democratizing movement that at last confronted the insidious intransigence of the color line. In fact, much of prophetic Christianity in America stems from the prophetic black church tradition. The Socratic questioning of the dogma of white supremacy, the prophetic witness of love and justice, and the hard-earned hope that sustains long-term commitment to the freedom struggle are the rich legacy of the prophetic black church. Yet Constantinian Christianity is so forceful that it is even making inroads into this fervent black prophetic Christianity. The sad truth is that the black church is losing its prophetic fervor in the age of the American empire. The power of the Constantinian Christian coalition must not be underestimated.

The rewards and respectability of the American empire that tempt Christians of all colors cannot be overlooked. The free-market fundamentalism that makes an idol of money and a fetish of wealth seduces too many Christians. And when the major example of prophetic Christianity—the black church tradition—succumbs to this temptation and seduction, the very future of

American democracy is in peril. The crisis of Christian identity in America is central to democracy matters.

The separation of church and state is a pillar for any genuine democratic regime. All non-Christian citizens must have the same rights and liberties under the law as Christian citizens. But religion will always play a fundamental role in the shaping of the culture and politics in a democracy. All citizens must be free to speak out of their respective traditions with a sense of tolerance—and even respect—for other traditions. And in a society where Christians are the vast majority, we Christians must never promote a tyranny of this majority over an outnumbered minority in the name of Jesus. Ironically, Jesus was persecuted by a tyrannical majority (Roman imperial rulers in alliance with subjugated Jewish elites) as a prophetic threat to the status quo. Are not our nihilistic imperial rulers and their Constantinian Christian followers leading us on a similar path—the suffocating of prophetic voices and viewpoints that challenge their status quo?

The battle against Constantinianism cannot be won without a reempowerment of the prophetic Christian movement, because the political might and rhetorical fervor of the Constantinians are too threatening; a purely secular fight won't be won. As my Princeton colleague Jeffrey Stout has argued in his magisterial book *Democracy and Tradition* (2003), in order to make the world safe for King's legacy and reinvigorate the democratic tradition, we must question not only the dogmatic assumptions of the Constantinians but also those of many secular liberals who would banish religious discourse entirely from the public square and admonish disillu-

sioned prophetic Christians not to allow their voices and viewpoints to spill over into the public square. The liberalism of influential philosopher John Rawls and the secularism of philosopher Richard Rorty—the major influences prevailing today in our courts and law schools—are so fearful of Christian tainting that they call for only secular public discourse on democracy matters. This radical secularism puts up a wall to prevent religious language in the public square, to police religious-based arguments and permit only secular ones. They see religious strife leading to social chaos and authoritarianism.

For John Rawls, religious language in public discourse is divisive and dangerous. It deploys claims of religious faith that can never be settled by appeals to reason. It fuels disagreements that can never be overcome by rational persuasion. So he calls for a public dialogue on fundamental issues that limits our appeals to constitutional and civic ideals that cut across religious and secular Americans and unite us in our loyalty to American democratic practices. There is great wisdom in his proposal but it fails to acknowledge how our loyalty to constitutional and civic ideals may have religious motivations. For prophetic Christians like Martin Luther King Jr., his appeal to democratic ideals was grounded in his Christian convictions. Should he—or we—remain silent about these convictions when we argue for our political views? Does not personal integrity require that we put our cards on the table when we argue for a more free and democratic America? In this way, Rawls's fear of religion—given its ugly past in dividing citizens—asks the impossible of us. Yet his concern is a crucial warning.

For Richard Rorty religious appeals are a conversation stopper.

They trump critical dialogue. They foreclose political debate. He wants to do away with any appeal to God in public life, especially since most appeals to God fuel the religious Right. He is a full-fledged secularist who sees little or no common good or public interest in the role of religion in civic discourse. Like Rawls, he supports the rights and liberties of religious citizens, but he wants to limit their public language to secular terms like democracy, equality, and liberty. His secular vision is motivated by a deep fear of the dogmatism and authoritarianism of the religious Right. There is much to learn from his view and many of his fears are warranted. But his secular policing of public life is too rigid and his secular faith is too pure. Ought we not to be concerned with the forms of dogmatism and authoritarianism in secular garb that trump dialogue and foreclose debate? Democratic practices—dialogue and debate in public discourse—are always messy and impure. And secular policing can be as arrogant and coercive as religious policing.

Prominent religious thinkers have also made impassioned arguments for the distancing of religion from American public discourse. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas's prophetic ecclesiasticism and John Milbank's radical orthodoxy—the major influences in seminaries and divinity schools—are so fearful of the tainting of the American empire that they call for a religious flight from the public square. For Hauerwas, Christians should be "resident aliens" in a corrupt American empire whose secular public discourse is but a thin cover for its robust nihilism. His aim is to preserve the integrity of the prophetic church by exposing the idolatry of Constantinian Christianity and bearing witness to the gospel of

love and peace. His deep commitment to a prophetic church of compassion and pacifism in a world of cruelty and violence leads him to reject the secular policing of Rawls and Rorty and to highlight the captivity of Constantinian Christians to imperial America. But he finds solace only in a prophetic ecclesiastical refuge that prefigures the coming kingdom of God. His prophetic sensibilities resonate with me and I agree with his critique of Constantinian Christianity and imperial America. Yet he unduly downplays the prophetic Christian commitment to justice and our role as citizens to make America more free and democratic. For him, the pursuit of social justice is a bad idea for Christians because it lures them toward the idols of secular discourse and robs them of their distinctive Christian identity. My defense of King's legacy requires that we accent justice as a Christian ideal and become even more active as citizens to change America without succumbing to secular idols or imperial fetishes. To be a prophetic Christian is not to be against the world in the name of church purity; it is to be in the world but not of the world's nihilism, in the name of a loving Christ who proclaims the this-worldly justice of a kingdom to come.

Hauerwas's radical imperative of world-denial motivates Milbank's popular Christian orthodoxy that pits the culprits of commodification and secularism against Christian socialism. His sophisticated wholesale attack on secular liberalism and modern capitalism is a fresh reminder of just how marginal prophetic Christianity has become in the age of the American empire. But, like Hauerwas, he fails to appreciate the moral progress, political breakthroughs, and spiritual freedoms forged by the heroic efforts of modern citizens of religious and secular traditions. It is just

as dangerous to overlook the gains of modernity procured by prophetic religious and progressive secular citizens as it is to overlook the blindness of Constantinian Christians and imperial secularists. And these gains cannot be preserved and deepened by reverting to ecclesiastical refuges or sectarian orthodoxies. Instead they require candor about our religious integrity and democratic identity that leads us to critique and resist Constantinian Christianity and imperial America.

All four towering figures—Rawls, Rorty, Hauerwas, and Milbank—have much to teach us and are forces for good in many ways. Yet they preclude a robust democratic Christian identity that builds on the legacy of prophetic Christian-led social movements. Jeffrey Stout—himself the most religiously musical, theologically learned, and philosophically subtle of all secular writers in America today—has, by contrast, argued that American democrats must join forces with the legacy of Christian protest exemplified by Martin Luther King Jr. He knows that the future of the American democratic experiment may depend on revitalizing this legacy. The legacies of prophetic Christianity put a premium on the kind of human being one chooses to be rather than the amount of commodities one possesses. They thereby constitute a wholesale onslaught against nihilism—in all of its forms—and strike a blow for decency and integrity. They marshal religious energies for democratic aims, yet are suspicious of all forms of idolatry, including democracy itself as an idol. They preserve their Christian identity and its democratic commitments, without coercing others and conflating church and state spheres.

There can be a new democratic Christian identity in America

only if imperial realities are acknowledged and prophetic legacies are revitalized. And despite the enormous resources of imperial elites to fan and fuel Constantinian Christianity, the underfunded and unpopular efforts of democrats and prophetic Christians must become more visible and vocal. The organizations of prophetic Christianity, such as the World Council of Churches, the civic action group Sojourners, and the black prophetic churches, must fight their way back into prominence in our public discourse. They must recognize that they have been under a kind of siege by the Constantinians and have not lost their dominance by accident.

Ironically, the powerful political presence of imperial Christians today is inspired by the success of the democratic Christian-led movement of Martin Luther King Jr. The worldly engagement of King's civil rights movement encouraged Constantinian Christians to become more organized and to partner with the power elites of the American empire. The politicization of Christian fundamentalism was a direct response to King's prophetic Christian legacy. It began as a white backlash against King's heritage in American public life, and it has always had a racist undercurrent—as with Bob Jones University, which until recently barred interracial dating.

The rise of Constantinian Christianity in America went hand in hand with the Republican Party's realignment of American politics—with their use of racially coded issues (busing, crime, affirmative action, welfare) to appeal to southern conservatives and urban white centrists. This political shift coincided with appeals to influential Jewish neoconservatives primarily concerned with the fragile security and international isolation of the state of Israel. In

particular, the sense of Jewish desperation during the Yom Kippur War of 1973—fully understandable given the threat of Jewish annihilation only thirty years after the vicious holocaust in Europe—drove the unholy alliance of American Republicans, Christian evangelicals, and Jewish neoconservatives.

On the domestic front, the fierce battle over admissions and employment slots produced a formidable backlash led by Jewish neoconservatives and white conservatives against affirmative action. The right-wing coalition of Constantinian Christians and Jewish neoconservatives helped elect Ronald Reagan in 1980. The fact that 35 percent of the most liberal nonwhite group—American Jews—voted for Reagan was a prescient sign of what was to come. When the Reverend Jerry Falwell of the Moral Majority received the Jabotinsky Award in 1981 in Israel, Constantinian Christianity had arrived on the international stage, with Jewish conservatism as its supporter. Imperial elites—including corporate ones with huge financial resources—here and abroad recognized just how useful organized Constantinian Christians could be for their nihilistic aims.

The rise of Constantinian Christian power in our democracy has progressed in stages. First, ecumenical groups like the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches, and liberal mainline denominations (Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Congregationalists)—who spoke out in defense of the rights of people of color, workers, women, gays, and lesbians—were targeted. The Christian fundamentalists (with big money behind them) lashed out with vicious attacks against the prophetic Christian voices, who were branded "liberal," and worked to discredit the

voices of moderation. In McCarthyist fashion, they equated the liberation theology movement, which put a limelight on the plight of the poor, with Soviet Communism. They cast liberal seminaries (especially my beloved Union Theological Seminary in New York City) as sinful havens of freaks, gays, lesbians, black radicals, and guilty white wimps. Such slanderous tactics have largely cowed the Christian Left, nearly erasing it off the public map.

The Christian fundamentalists have also tried to recruit Constantinian Christians of color in order to present a more diverse menagerie of faces to the imperial elites in the White House, Congress, state houses, and city halls, and on TV. The manipulative elites of the movement knew that this integrated alliance would attract even more financial support from big business to sustain a grassroots organizing campaign in imperial churches across the country. The veneer of diversity is required for the legitimacy of imperial rule today.

The last stage in the rise of the Constantinians was their consolidation of power by throwing their weight around with well-organized political action groups, most notably the Christian Coalition and the Moral Majority. With this political coordination they gained clout, power, legitimacy, and respectability within the golden gates of the American empire—they were acknowledged as mighty movers, shakers, and brokers who had to be reckoned with in the private meetings of the plutocrats and their politicians. Imperial elites recognized just how useful the Constantinian Christians could be for their nihilistic aims. The journey for Constantinian Christians from Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 to

George W. Bush's selection in 2000 has been a roaring success—based on the world's nihilistic standards.

Never before in the history of the American Republic has a group of organized Christians risen to such prominence in the American empire. And this worldly success—a bit odd for a fundamentalist group with such otherworldly aspirations—has sent huge ripples across American Christendom. Power, might, size, status, and material possessions—all paraphernalia of the nihilism of the American empire—became major themes of American Christianity. It now sometimes seems that all Christians speak in one voice when in fact it is only that the loudness of the Constantinian element of American Christianity has so totally drowned out the prophetic voices. Imperial Christianity, market spirituality, money-obsessed churches, gospels of prosperity, prayers of let's-make-a-deal with God or help me turn my wheel of fortune have become the prevailing voice of American Christianity. In this version of Christianity the precious blood at the foot of the cross becomes mere Kool-Aid to refresh eager upwardly mobile aspirants in the nihilistic American game of power and might. And there is hardly a mumbling word heard about social justice, resistance to institutional evil, or courage to confront the powers that be—with the glaring exception of abortion.

Needless to say, the commodification of Christianity is an old phenomenon—and a central one in American life past and present. Yet the frightening scope and depth of this commercialization of Christianity is new. There is no doubt that the churches reflect and refract the larger market-driven nihilism of our society and world.

Yet it is the nearly wholesale eclipse of nonmarket values and visions—of love, justice, compassion, and kindness to strangers—that is terrifying. Where are the Christian voices outraged at the greed of corporate elites while millions of children live in poverty? Do American Christians even know that the three richest men in the world have more wealth than the combined gross domestic product of the bottom forty-eight countries or that the personal wealth of the 225 richest individuals is equal to the annual income of the poorest 47 percent of the entire world's population? Philanthropy is fine, but what of justice, institutional fairness, and structural accountability?

There are, however, groups of prophetic Christians who are taking up the challenge of confronting the rise of the Christian Right and have realized the necessity of countering those powerful organizations with their own. There is Jim Wallis, who leads the activist group Sojourners; the Reverend James Forbes of Riverside Church in New York City; Sujay Johnson Cork of the Hampton Preachers' Conference; the Reverend Charles Adams of Hartford Memorial Church in Detroit; the Reverend Jeremiah Wright of Trinity Church in Chicago; Bishop Charles E. Blake of West Angeles Church of God in Christ; the Reverend J. Alfred Smith of Allen Temple in Oakland; and Father Michael Pfleger of Faith Community of Saint Sabina in Chicago. And there are quite a few more.

Yet it is undeniable that the challenge of keeping the prophetic Christian movement vital and vibrant in the age of the American empire is largely unmet as of yet. The pervasive sleepwalking in American churches in regard to social justice is frightening. The

movement led by Martin Luther King Jr.—the legacy of which has been hijacked by imperial Christians—forged the most subtle and significant democratic Christian identity of modern times. And it now lies in ruins. Can prophetic Christians make its dry bones live again?

The Constantinian Christianity of the Bush administration—especially of President Bush, Attorney General John Ashcroft, and Congressman Tom DeLay—whatever authentic pietistic dimensions it may have, must not be the model of American Christian identity. Its nihilistic policies and quests for power and might supersede any personal confessions of humility and compassion. Even the most seemingly pious can inflict great harm. Constantine himself flouted his piety even as he continued to dominate and conquer peoples. Yet a purely secular effort against the religious zealotry will never be powerful enough to prevail; it is only with a coalition of the prophetic Christians of all colors, the prophetic Jews and Muslims and Buddhists, and the democratic secularists that we can preserve the American democratic experiment.

The recent controversy over Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* reveals the nihilistic undercurrents of the conservative coalition and potential rifts within it. The vicious Christian anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism over the past eighteen centuries stem primarily from the wedding of biblical narratives of Jesus's Crucifixion that highlight Jewish responsibility and Roman innocence to Constantine's incorporation of Christianity into imperial power. As long as the early Christians—themselves largely Jewish—were a persecuted minority in the Roman empire, their biblical claims about Jewish culpability and Roman indifference regarding

the murder of Jesus were a relatively harmless intra-Jewish debate in the first century AD about a prophetic Jew who challenged the Jewish colonial elites and Roman imperial authorities. For example, when the phrase "the Jews" is used sixteen times in Mark, Luke, and Matthew and seventy-one times in John, these writers of the synoptic Gospels—themselves Jews—were engaged in an intramural debate between themselves and non-Christian Jews. Both groups were persecuted by imperial Roman authorities. And all knew of the thuggery of such authorities—including that of Pontius Pilate fifty years before. With the Roman destruction of the Jewish temple in AD 70, rabbinical Judaism emerged alongside the Jewish-led Christian movement. The Christian and Judaic struggle for the souls of Jews in imperial Rome was intense, yet under oppressive conditions for both groups.

With the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman empire in the fourth century AD—and the persecution of all other religions—the intramural debate became lethal. And the phrase "the Jews" in the Gospels became the basis of a vicious Christian anti-Judaism and pernicious imperial policy that blamed, attacked, maimed, and murdered Jews of Judaic faith. With the injection of race, Christian anti-Judaism (a religious bigotry) became Christian anti-Semitism (a racist bigotry). Jews who converted to Christianity could avoid the former, but all Jews suffered the latter. And the history of both bigotries is a crime against humanity—then and now.

Mel Gibson's gory film of Jesus's murder, which verges on a pornography of violence, resonates deeply with the ignorance and innocence of sincere Constantinian Christians in the American

empire, whose grasp of the source of anti-Semitism is weak and whose complicity with imperial arrogance is ignored. His portrayal of Jewish responsibility and Roman innocence fits the centuries-long pattern of Christian anti-Semitism—in its effect, not in his intention.

Ironically, those Jews who eagerly aligned themselves with Constantinian Christians to defend imperial America and the colonial policies of the Israeli state now see the deep anti-Semitism of their Christian fundamentalist allies. And they are right. But these same Jewish conservatives—Constantinian Jews—fail to see their own complicity with imperial American elites who support and condone colonial policies and racist anti-Arab sentiments of Israeli conservative elites. Democracy matters—promoted by prophetic Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and secular progressives—require moral consistency and ethical integrity. We all fall short yet we must never fail to fight all forms of bigotry, especially when racist propaganda is conjoined to nihilistic quests for power and might. Will the deep dimensions of Christian anti-Semitism shatter the conservative coalition in imperial America? Will Jewish elites in Hollywood begin to question the racist stereotypes of other groups they've condoned now that this controversy has turned against them?

I speak as a Christian—one whose commitment to democracy is very deep but whose Christian convictions are even deeper. Democracy is not my faith. And American democracy is not my idol. 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. To be a Christian—a follower of Jesus Christ—is to love wisdom, love justice, and love freedom. This is the radical love in Christian freedom and the radical freedom in Christian love that embraces Socratic questioning, prophetic witness, and tragicomic hope. If Christians do not exemplify this love and freedom, then we side with the nihilists of the Roman empire (cowardly elite Romans and subjugated Jews) who put Jesus to a humiliating death. Instead of receiving his love in freedom as a life-enhancing gift of grace, we end up believing in the idols of the empire that nailed him to the cross. 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. To be a Christian is to live dangerously, honestly, freely—to step in the name of love as if you may land on nothing, yet to keep stepping because the something that sustains you no empire can give you and no empire can take away. This is the kind of vision and courage required to enable the renewal of prophetic, democratic Christian identity in the age of the American empire.

THE NECESSARY ENGAGEMENT WITH YOUTH CULTURE

It is a fallacy of radical youth to demand all or nothing, and to view every partial activity as compromise. Either engage in something that will bring revolution and transformation all at one blow, or do nothing, it seems to say. But compromise is really only a desperate attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable. It is not compromise to study to understand the world in which one lives, to seek expression for one's inner life, to work to harmonize it and make it an integer, nor is it compromise to work in some small sphere for the harmonization of social life and the relations between men who work together, a harmonization that will bring democracy into every sphere of life.

—RANDOLPH S. BOURNE,
Youth and Life (1913)

When Public Enemy first came out we used to say "Public Enemy, we're agents for the preservation of the Black mind. We're media hijackers." We worked to hijack the media and put it in our own form. . . . Every time we checked for ourselves on the news they were locking us up anyway, so the interpretation coming from Rap was a lot clearer. That's why I call Rap the Black CNN.