

# Radiant In Joy

Paul Gilk



**Quaker Universalist Fellowship**

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## Editor's Introduction

Paul Gilk is an independent scholar and writer. He lives in a 19th-century log house he reconstructed for himself on land that was once a part of his family's farm in the woods of northern Wisconsin. His roots go deep into what he calls the peasant culture of his German/Austrian immigrant ancestors who homesteaded there. With his Swiss-born wife, Susanna, he raises much of his own food, and they are folk musicians in demand for musical performances throughout the area. They are attenders at the North Central Wisconsin Friends Worship Group in Merrill, an affiliate of Northern Yearly Meeting.

A long-time ecological thinker and critic of American consumerist society, Paul has lived in various parts of the upper Midwest. He served for a time as co-editor of *North Country Anvil*, a small literary/political magazine published during the 1970s and '80s in Millville, Minnesota, and his articles have appeared in that as well as in *Synthesis/Regeneration: A Magazine of Green Social Thought*, published in St. Louis. He has also written two books and a collection of poetry.

The essay presented here has been condensed from a longer piece, and I hope that in "pruning" it I have preserved for QUF readers a lot of its unique style—often blunt, sometimes whimsical, and always deeply thoughtful. Paul is the kind of appreciative author an editor loves to work with, and I follow his express instructions here in "taking a deep bow."

Rhoda Gilman



## Radiant In Joy

Several books have come into my hands lately that treat of avoidance, evasion, obfuscation, and denial. One of them is Robert Jay Lifton's and Greg Mitchell's *Hiroshima in America*, written in time for the fiftieth anniversary of the Hiroshima atomic bomb blast, which occurred on August 6, 1945. I am reading it in advance of the sixtieth anniversary.<sup>1</sup>

The book has a provocative subtitle: *A Half-Century of Denial*, and it is this theme of denial that I'd like to explore. I'm neither smart enough nor spiritually clear enough for the task, so I'll stumble around in the briar patch, tearing my clothes, scratching my hide, and trampling on some tender vines. Bear with me.

I appreciate but am not satisfied with the psychological analysis (especially as focused on Harry Truman) in *Hiroshima in America*. To know why there was such a "flow of feeling," not only to develop nuclear bombs, but then to use them twice on Japanese cities, even as the Japanese were signaling a willingness to explore surrender, is to plunge below or beyond psychology. The difficult area—almost taboo—is spirituality. Our Western psychology, including mass psychology, has been powerfully shaped by the language, concepts, ideas, and yeasty virus of the Christian Gospels. Therefore, to penetrate the psychology of Americans in regard to Hiroshima is also to penetrate the extent to which gospel yeast has leavened the underlying soul and spirit of Americans who think of themselves as Christians.

As this country has such a hugely powerful Christian heritage, at least in terms of over-all religious mythology and church affiliation, and as that heritage is supposedly grounded in the Jewish Jesus of first-century Palestine, I am of a mind to

take our Christian leaders at their word and attempt an examination of avoidance, evasion, obfuscation, and denial from within the ethics and morality of the Jesus portrayed in the four main Gospels. Those, simply, are for me embodied in the Sermon on the Mount and the command to love, even to love the enemy.

I grew up a Protestant Christian, and after forty years of exploration and digression, I still am a Protestant Christian—although with a very different understanding from that of the gawky, crew-cut farm boy in the J. C. Penney’s sport coat of the early 1960s. I now stumble in the direction of Thomas J. J. Altizer’s Christian atheism, and perhaps in the image-breaking footsteps of Bishop John Shelby Spong.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile I take comfort in a circle of friends and neighbors who worship or meditate, as the case may be, in the silent manner of Quakers. Although my present sense of Spirit seems more akin to the Tao Te Ching than to Christian orthodoxy, I am hoping to alienate neither the conventionally pious believer nor the conventionally impious unbeliever. You will neither have to check your supernaturalism at the front desk in the briar patch nor have your “save-me-from-religion” card punched to take your turn among the thorns.

The question is whether people who call themselves Christian are or are not obliged to live their lives to the fullest possible extent in accordance with the ethics and morality of the person they call Lord and Savior. Or does alignment with church, nation, and “civilization” reduce the obligation to a patchwork of creeds, dogmas, and pledges, the heartfelt reiteration of which is sufficient for “salvation?” If so, then there is nothing, humanly speaking, that stands between us and Armageddon except a limited sense of what is conventionally right and wrong. This can be seen, for example, in the alarming elastic capacities of “just war” doctrine. Will the present deadly blend of hostile human (largely male) realpolitik with instantaneous deadly technologies make earth uninhabitable

for mammals and birds and who knows what other creatures? Or can it be penetrated and pruned by the radically nonviolent compassion displayed by a certain East-Mediterranean peasant from first-century Palestine? There may be ways to state the dilemma with greater elegance, but I think you get my drift.

James Carroll, in *Constantine's Sword*, says "The study of history always implies a study of its alternative." Barbara Tuchman, in *The March of Folly*, says "The hypothetical has charm, but the actuality of government makes history."<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the future, as an occasional bumper sticker proclaims, is not what it used to be. Alternative visions may have charm, but don't hold your breath waiting for them to be realized.

There are lots of evangelical Christians (not all aligned with the political right) who insist that just as Jesus was persecuted and killed by "the world," so he is soon to come again and return the favor. This is a doomsday view of divine retribution lightened (only for believers) by a prospect of life after death in a wonderful, special, very long-term place. *This world* is going to end in irreversible disaster. Earth is destined for the same fate as the unsaved. And is it not a striking irony that the human tradition which clings most strongly to this view—Americanized Christianity, primarily Protestant—is also the governing agency which has made the prospect of irreversible disaster plausible?

Little Boy and Fat Man, the nuclear bombs dropped on Japan, were products of the best Western scientific minds, nurtured by more than a thousand years of "Christian civilization." The prototype bomb was set off in a desert stolen from its Mexican and American Indian inhabitants at a site called Trinity, named after the triune God of Christian orthodoxy. Witnesses felt religious awe in the presence of the first atomic blast, and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson even speculated on the use of the bomb to bring Soviet Russia "into the fold of Christian civilization."<sup>4</sup>

The Christian Right in its desire to see Israel restored (or recreated) to “biblical” conformity in order to set the stage for Armageddon and the End Times seems to yearn for a biblically predicted doomsday. This yearning, however, is comfortably embedded in American affluence, with suburban homes, green lawns, nice cars, computers, dishwashers, septic systems, clean drinking water, safe beds, and plenty of gasoline and electricity. There is no real-life suffering in this yearning. It is a political, mythological, religious fantasy, devoid of the pain that would quickly and quietly strip such atrocity anticipation of its glamor. Those enmeshed in the hallucination believe that God has a prophetic script to fulfill, and the saved will be—well, *saved*. The rest of us will not only suffer plagues and disasters but are also destined for eternal damnation and torment.

If American foreign policy seems like a cross-stitched, rumpled, and incoherent reflection of this religious mythology, it largely is. Our missionary zeal is deeply entangled with generations of belief in manifest destiny, American exceptionalism, and all the rest of the civil religion which asserts that virtuous America has been commissioned to uplift and Christianize the entire world. And, since the Bible tells us that the ox is not to be muzzled as he treads out the grain, there are justifiable economic advantages which accrue to the oxen.

As Thomas Merton says in his *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, the discovery of America inspired some Europeans to imagine that human society was “getting off to an entirely new start.”<sup>5</sup> There was a new world beyond the frontier, without a murky past, without sin, and therefore a paradise. To claim it for civilization was our destiny, against which dark-skinned people with murky histories snarled in envy and resentment. This mythology has usurped whatever humble and troubled adherence some Christians have to the difficult and demanding teachings of the Gospels: to be a servant, to be the least, to love both the neighbor and the enemy.



If the Book of Revelation correctly anticipates the reign of an Anti-Christ, we have only to turn on AM talk radio to hear its strident, all-knowing voice. Here we have Christianity transformed into an encompassing belief system that lives and moves and feeds from a supposed prophecy of divine authenticity. It has an answer (or can find one) to every nagging doubt or uncertainty, even as it is enmeshed in a deeply anxious clinging to worldly security represented by insurance policies, retirement plans, rust-free cars, crisp police, nuclear power plants, and a military larger and more deadly than the rest of the world's combined. All the while it cheers on the End Times.

The term “psychic numbing,” employed by Lifton and Mitchell, may be clinically useful, but it is much too weak for dealing with this reality. Even the word hypocrisy is inadequate. “Idolatry” and “blasphemy” begin to point in the right direction.

Some light on how this religious predicament came about can be found in two articles published in a recent issue of *Zion's Herald*.<sup>6</sup> The first is an interview with John Dominic Crossan, where the term “collaborative eschatology” comes up. This means, says Crossan, that “whatever spiritual power there is in the world must be shared evenly among the members of the world.” This “recipe for salvation” is also expressed in the slogan “first justice, then peace,” as opposed to “first victory, then peace,” which is the “program the world's been run on for about 5,000 years.”

In the second article Paul Alan Laughlin discusses four “Master Images” of Jesus and Christ: Historical Jesus, Narrative Jesus, Sacred Christ, and Archetypal Christ. The Sacred Christ, he points out, has “a life of its own” and is the “principal object of Christian devotion worldwide.” Then he asks why “so many of [Jesus'] most ardent professed followers blithely ignore such key teachings of their beloved ‘Lord and Savior’ as the dawning Reign of God, the spiritual worthlessness of earthly treasures, the unreliability of self-righteous religious authorities, the value

of the poor and otherwise despised, and the necessity of loving not only the foreigner but the foe as well?” One answer he gives is that the Sacred Christ image is so powerful in its supernaturalism that it has rendered “irrelevant—and indeed invisible—most of the particulars of the life and teachings of the Narrative Jesus.”

Crossan’s analysis suggests another reason. When the Christian Church merged with the Roman Empire in the fourth century, the concept “first justice, then peace” had to be radically pruned from the faith in favor of “first victory, then peace.” This meant that the list of key teachings Laughlin spells out had to be locked away in favor of religious creeds and church dogmas that did not directly challenge or threaten the ideology of empire. The Sacred Christ image, with its sacraments and otherworldly salvation, was no impediment to empire victory and even, through the Gospel of John, provided the empire a new overlay of religious rationale.

In his reference to 5,000 years Crossan implicitly alludes to the duration of civilization from its beginnings to the present day. It is the empires and kingdoms of civilization that hold to the slogan “first victory, then peace,” while a collaborative eschatology aligns the reign of God against these forces. And, as we can easily see, civilization has now achieved globalization to the near ruin of all noncivilized cultures and with huge impacts on planetary ecology. The “blowback” comes in a variety of forms—from epidemic diseases to global toxins to species extinction to apocalyptic weaponry to climate change to rampant terrorism.

Scholars like Crossan and Marcus Borg, with their deep analysis and explication of the reign of God, are critically important because the Christian faith desperately needs the creation-based spiritual traction that the prophet Walter Rauschenbusch began articulating more than a century ago with his “discovery” of the kingdom of God.<sup>7</sup> If, in Crossan’s phrase, God is going to “clean up the world,” cleansing will

require the spiritual humility within collaborative eschatology. Thinking that God will rescue the saved via the “Rapture,” or that there is no hope outside supernatural and otherworldly anticipations fits neatly into the Sacred Christ mythology that Christianity has become since its compact with the emperor Constantine.

For Christians there is no more pressing spiritual need than piercing through salvationist mythology to the creation-based Historical and Narrative Jesus that Laughlin describes. Without that connection, Christianity provides the utopian religious lubricant that enables empire to conquer its way to global disaster. A “pure” Sacred Christ, in its alignment with empire, results not so much in the Anti-Christ as the Anti-Jesus.

Many Sacred-Christ Christians apparently believe that God yearns to see creation destroyed. Stewardship and servanthood are only minor virtues in that cosmic view. They are even seen as impediments, vices and sins, if they seem to retard the arrival of “prophetic” breakdown. To get through to Jesus requires a potentially painful pruning of credal dependency, a faithful trust not in religious formulae but in the powerful compassion of the invisible God combined with a passionate commitment to the reign of God on this earth.

Globalized civilization is reaching an epochal crisis that is going to deepen and intensify. As it does, we will see the program of Christ having a separate existence from Jesus to be fraught with disastrous consequences. Sacred-Christ Christianity has become the state religion of Anti-Christ empire. “First victory, then peace”—or, to alter slightly the famous assertion of an American officer in Vietnam: “We had to destroy the world in order to save it.”

There are a number of people—I mean here writers, activists, and intellectuals—whom I trust. And then there are a few people whose life experience or depth of engagement is so basic that, like them or not, accept or argue as much as you want,

their utterances are pivotal to our spiritual discernment in these times. Two such persons, for me, are Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Thomas Merton, a German Protestant preacher and an English/French/American Catholic monk.

In both Bonhoeffer and Merton I perceive a man in the wine press of moral extremity, driven by crisis to a kind of intellectual clarity, a degree of spiritual lucidity in which conventional religion was seen as part of the mythology and world structure that are fostering global destruction. First I'd like to wrestle with a concept for which Bonhoeffer is famous—a glimmer, perhaps a vision, that he saw as he was waiting to be hung for his (relatively minor) role in a plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler. That concept is “religionless Christianity.”<sup>8</sup>

One might compare religion to a kind of soup kitchen where people come for a truly healthy meal. The purpose of eating is not simply to go away full, slowly get hungry, and eventually come back for another bowl of soup. The object of the meal is to awaken, enlighten, and empower. It is to change, to deepen, to intensify the spiritual gravitas of the eater. Human beings need to grow, to mature, to become more spiritually awake, alive, and solid.

You will know whether the soup kitchen is putting out the real goods by whether those who eat there are spiritually alive and growing. Part of such growth is spiritual discernment, and part of that discernment, despite the terror and reluctance, is to recognize the complicity of religion with “the world.” It is to see the extent to which religion kisses and blesses empire, patriotic identity, strategic advantage, national interest, and both the commercial predation and military violence that advances self-interest and empire.

If the soup kitchen is feeding only mythological baby formula, it is engaged in religious infantilization. It becomes either rigidly strict or sloppily permissive. While the latter may lead to an erosion of cultural standards, the former is by far the larger problem. Permissiveness is deflating and demoralizing,

but it has the capacity to be self-correcting, rather like the Prodigal Son who got sick of eating with the pigs. Rigidity is more dangerous, for it is inclined to align itself with authoritarian forms of political organization.

As a Protestant pastor Bonhoeffer had in him the spiritual lucidity by which to see not only the madness of Hitler and the Nazi Party but also the obsequious idolatry of the German churches, both Protestant and Catholic, as they aligned themselves with fascism. Daring a mortal sin in his involvement with an assassination plot, Bonhoeffer found himself on a trajectory to be hung. This crisis drove him deeper and deeper into the necessity of spiritual discernment. It caused him to recognize that unless Christianity produced “religionless” Christians who stood for justice, not victory, the reign of God, not empire, the soup kitchen was only cooking a toxic baby broth of foamy mythology, counseling comfort and complicity, not creating prophets and martyrs.

The perniciousness of this broth goes back to “first victory, then peace,” whether or not the Constantinian compromise was what created the recipe or only standardized it. What makes the broth so poisonous in our time is the lethal power of global civilization. The religious broth is ancient; its alignment with empire did not in the past make for universal toxicity. Now it does.

“Religionless Christianity” means daring to step beyond the infantile safety of soup kitchen mythology. It means we have to grow up and eat real food. The condition of the world and the amazing spectacle of Christians lusting for the Rapture along with the demolition of the earth tells us that not growing up is no longer an option. Or, insofar as it is an option, it will lead, by whatever bizarre choices and erratic actions, to global disaster.

We all have been indoctrinated with the understanding that civilization is our savior from primitive savagery, from the

pagan, the heathen, the barbarian, from backwardness of all types—and from violence itself. Civilized state power now constitutes the only form of legitimate or “sacred” violence (even when it is used pre-emptively) against any form of illegitimate violence. This is our myth, and it has served, in Crossan’s words, to protect “the program the world’s been run on for about 5,000 years.” The explicit myth of Rapture and End Times is only the outer layer of the myth that perpetuates and justifies sacred violence. The inner myth, the myth of civilization as our savior from primitive brutality, protects the economic structures of exploitation and inequality as it downplays and excuses the ecological damage resulting from those things.

In the Foreword to Gil Bailie’s *Violence Unveiled*, Rene Girard says: “The Gospels contain an anthropology of religion.”<sup>9</sup> According to Bailie, what “Scripture is intended to achieve is a conversion of the human heart that will allow humanity to dispense with organized violence without sliding into the abyss of uncontrollable violence, the apocalyptic abyss.”

Bailie asserts that the hidden, subversive energy of the Gospels lies in identification with the victim. That identification undoes the efficacy of sacred violence, which is the special kind of violence that is supposed to end illicit and profane violence. Gospel, says Bailie, is a “demythologizing virus.” Myth, on the other hand, is “fragile and survives only when its premises are accepted uncritically. . . . Myth remembers discretely and selectively.” Then he goes on to say: “The gospel truth gradually makes it impossible for us to keep forgetting what myth exists to help us forget. It thereby sets up a struggle between the impulse to sacralize, justify, or romanticize the violence that generates and regenerates conventional culture and the impulse to reveal that violence and strip away its mythic justifications. Fundamentally, human history is a struggle between myth and gospel.”

Gil Bailie leads us to a point from which we can begin to see a possible future, as a nonviolent gospel steadily replaces a

multitude of myths packed with sacred violence. From this vantage point, it's possible to see how fanatic End Times Christianity only knows the Sacred Christ as a largely religious abstraction, as an element within a cosmic myth blown up like a biblical blimp.

Thomas Merton quotes Gandhi as saying:

Truthfulness is even more important than peacefulness. Indeed, lying is the mother of violence. A truthful man cannot long remain violent. He will perceive in the course of his research that he has no need to be violent, and he will further discover that so long as there is the slightest trace of violence in him, he will fail to find the truth [for which] he is searching. . . . The mother of all other lies is the lie we persist in telling ourselves about ourselves. And since we are not brazen enough liars to make ourselves believe our own lie individually, we pool all our lies together and believe them because they have become the big lie uttered by the vox populi, and this kind of lie we accept as ultimate truth.<sup>10</sup>

So we need to look behind the curtain of myth, behind “the lie we persist in telling ourselves about ourselves.” It is in its mythological alignment with civilized values, with civilized weaponry, that End Times Christianity becomes so dangerous and deadly. Which is to say: the myths that cloud and fog our consciousness are not simply religious; they are profoundly and even more importantly civilized. Many people are prepared to throw off or deflate the biblical blimp. That's the easy part. But don't imagine for a moment that the task is finished there. Penetrating the mythological sanctity of civilization is next, and even harder.

What led me to my current conviction was a process begun by a simple, sincere question I began asking of older, smarter people in the early 1970s. “Explain to me,” I said, “why small

farms are dying, why small-scale agriculture is getting hammered.” I was then a young man living in a large city, but with unexpectedly strong longings for the small-farm life and the countryside of my youth.

The answers did not satisfy. In fact, they seemed trite and shallow. So I began to study and read in earnest—from Martin Buber to Lewis Mumford, E. F. Schumacher to Wendell Berry, Elise Boulding to Carolyn Merchant. Over my own reluctance and anxiety, perhaps even over religious dread (I hadn’t exactly been raised a fundamentalist, but religious indoctrination had virtually made me one), an answer slowly congealed. Civilization, I realized, came into being with the armed and deadly expropriation of the agricultural abundance of the pre-civilized agrarian community. Institutionalizing both militarism and slavery, civilization has lived by expropriation ever since. It produced the underlying structure of class. The explicit pattern of aristocrat and peasant may have (except for token remnants) ended with the industrial revolution, but elite prerogative continues to saturate all civilized societies.

To live by what Gil Bailie calls “gospel” is to enter into a world where justice comes first, then peace. Getting there means facing and overcoming the avoidance, evasion, and denial that myth enables and encourages. To penetrate myth and repent of it in favor of the lucidity of truth means to disavow any further alignment with the economic advantages that come from institutionalized violence and systemic inequality. It means taking the ethics and morality of the Gospels in dead earnest—servanthood and stewardship—as we trust that the world so configured will be radiant in joy. I do not say that this is the fully articulated reign of God; I do say it is a critical step in the right direction.

To love God with all your heart, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor, including the neighbor who is your enemy, as you love yourself, is to enter a divinely nonviolent revolutionary world of stewardship and servanthood. As Merton puts it:



The tactic of nonviolence is a tactic of love that seeks the salvation and redemption of the opponent, not his castigation, humiliation, and defeat. A pretended nonviolence that seeks to defeat and humiliate the adversary by spiritual instead of physical attack is little more than a confession of weakness. True nonviolence is totally different from this, and much more difficult. It strives to operate without hatred, without hostility, and without resentment. It works without aggression, taking the side of the good that it is able to find already present in the adversary.<sup>11</sup>

Gil Bailie says, “If we humans become too morally troubled by the brutality to revel in the glories of the civilization made possible by it, we will simply have to reinvent culture.” I believe this is exactly what Jesus was about and exactly what God-detoxified people everywhere across the world must do at once.

The outer myth of religious End Times and the inner myth of civilization are packed within the traditional Christian doctrine of the two kingdoms. It is precisely this two-kingdom arrangement that not only permits but encourages institutions of violence. In Kingdom 1, God the good cop offers salvation; in Kingdom 2, God the bad cop wields the sword. But to live by gospel is to live by what Gil Bailie calls “a powerless God of love,” a God who “chooses to suffer violence rather than to sponsor it.”

With the rise in the U.S. of the Christian Right, the cleavage between those who live by Christian myth and those who at least attempt to live by gospel has grown wider and deeper and has reached the point of radically distinct spiritualities. When myth achieves the power by which to function independently of gospel, those who struggle for gospel become the enemies of myth. Within the overarching mythology camp there are many Christians whose personal lives

and behavior are exemplary. It is also true that the articulation of the social, economic, and political implications of gospel often tends to be both heady and strident, more given to image-breaking than to creative culture reinvention. The frequent stridency, however, of the civil rights, women's, environmental, and same-sex movements has resulted from the huge resistance—even demonization—that they have faced from the myth camp.

In today's world, the Christian myth is allied to the historical myth of American exceptionalism. In his book *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*, Seymour Martin Lipset says: "Americans are the most churchgoing in Protestantism and the most fundamentalist in Christendom." And he goes on: "The very emphasis in the Protestant sectarian tradition on the religious chosenness of the United States has meant that if the country is perceived as slipping away 'from the controlling obligations of the covenant,' it is on the road to Hell. The need has made Americans particularly inclined to support movements for the elimination of evil by illegal and even violent means if necessary."<sup>12</sup>

Chris Hedges, writing an article on "The Christian Right and the Rise of American Fascism," agrees.<sup>13</sup> He recalls: "Dr. James Luther Adams, my ethics professor at Harvard Divinity School, told us that when we were his age, he was then close to 80, we would all be fighting the 'Christian fascists.'" This warning, Hedges says, came 25 years ago, and it was hard to take it seriously at the time. Now he is a believer. Adams had been in Germany in 1935-36, and he "saw in the Christian Right, long before we did, disturbing similarities with the German Christian Church and the Nazi Party, similarities that he said would, in the event of prolonged social instability or a national crisis, see American fascists, under the guise of religion, rise to dismantle the open society. He despaired of liberals,

who he said, as in Nazi Germany, mouthed silly platitudes about dialogue and inclusiveness that made them ineffectual and impotent.”

Hedges names various Christian Right ideologues and books, including one entitled *America's Providential History*, which is the “standard textbook used in many Christian schools and a staple of the Christian home schooling movement.” It “calls for ‘Bible believing Christians’ to take dominion of America.” This “Dominion Mandate” is simply a more fortified, mythological step in the direction of American exceptionalism.

The roots of this dogma go deep. Andrew Bacevich, in *The New American Militarism*, has a keen and incisive chapter called “Onward.” In it he says:

Well before 1776, Americans claimed for themselves a pivotal role in the panoramic drama of salvation. Indeed, the American story begins with the forging of a special covenant. God singled out Americans to be His new Chosen People. He charged them with the task of carving out of the wilderness a New Jerusalem. He assigned to them unique responsibilities to serve as agents of His saving grace. America was to become, in John Winthrop's enduring formulation of 1630, “as a city upon a hill,” its light illuminating the world. Present-day Americans beyond counting hold firm to these convictions. Even among citizens oblivious to or rejecting its Christological antecedents, widespread, almost automatic support for this doctrine of American Exceptionalism persists.<sup>14</sup>

Thus it's a mistake to believe the Christian Right is some sort of mass delusion springing mysteriously out of nowhere in the last thirty or forty years. The Christian church has, historically, used the following names for itself, names (or

concepts) borrowed biblically from ancient Israel: chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, purchased people.

To explain its present ascendancy Bacevich points to a book by Rene Noorbergen and Ralph Hood, published in 1980. In *The Death Cry of an Eagle* these authors “found abundant evidence that a decadent America was in an accelerating spiral of decline. Turning away from God and toward corruption and licentiousness, the United States was in danger of suffering the same fate as Babylon, Greece, Rome, and other great civilizations of the past.” He quotes their “shocking discovery that global power, once thought to be the monopoly of the United States, is fast slipping from this country’s grasp.”

Identifying with the Christian righteousness of American empire, these writers and others whom Bacevich cites “linked the revival of U.S. military power to the nation’s fulfillment of its larger providential mission.” This led to a “crusade theory of warfare,” with scriptural sanctions for striking the first blow. “God was literally on America’s side, and He had empowered Americans to act on His behalf.”

Because of the doctrine of premillennial dispensationalism, to which many, but not all, American evangelicals subscribe, Israel lies at the convergence of national security and eschatology. Crucial to the sequence of events leading to Christ’s second coming is the return of Jews to the Holy Land. According to Bacevich:

In that sense the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 started the clock ticking—this was a central premise of Hal Lindsey’s 1970s mega-bestseller *The Late Great Planet Earth*—and suggested to many evangelicals that the end days are indeed fast approaching. . . . As one consequence, the Religious Right has been unflinchingly loyal to the Jewish state, eager to support Israel in the performance of its prescribed role (although according to the most

commonly accepted script, before the Millennium arrives all Jews will either convert to Christianity or be killed off).

Chris Hedges, in the article already cited, talks about “a vision of Christ at the head of a great and murderous army of heavenly avengers.” The spark that could ignite it, he says, “may be lying in the hands of an Islamic terrorist cell, in the hands of the ideological twins of the Christian Right. Another catastrophic terrorist attack could be our Reichstag fire, the excuse used to begin the accelerated dismantling of our open society. The ideology of the Christian Right is not one of love and compassion, the central theme of Christ’s message, but of violence and hatred. It has a strong appeal to many in our society, but it is also aided by our complacency.”

We may well ask why complacency is so widespread among mainstream “liberal” Protestants, especially those who are lineal descendants of the Puritan tradition. In the words of Bacevich they are “inclusive, proudly heterodox, dwindling in overall numbers, and politically anemic.” Why have they “vacated the public square” while right-wing evangelical Protestantism has taken their place?

The most concise answer is that by the 1960s Christian mythology had been so largely discredited by the discoveries of science that huge portions of the Christian mainstream entered into a troubled, difficult re-evaluation of what the Christian religion was all about. Because of uncertainty and deference to the “conservatives,” this spiritual struggle was mostly hidden from view, not openly discussed with or among the laity. So the churches tended in the direction of mildly abstract piety, neither facing up to the end of mythology nor engaging the radical challenges now lying more fully exposed in the Gospels.

Sensing uncertainty in the opposing camp, right-wing Christians smelled opportunity. They mistook this “dark night of the soul” for fatal weakness, and this produced in them a kind of victors’ exultation. Such uncertainty, they said, “proved” who was right and who was wrong. In some places this had real institutional consequences. At the Missouri Synod Lutheran seminary in St. Louis, for instance, the “liberal” professors were removed in a reactionary take-over in the mid-1970s.

To say that the direct heirs to the Puritan tradition have become inclusive, heterodox, and anemic is also to say a similar thing of American liberalism and therefore of the Democratic Party. The dark night of the soul generated by liberalism’s acceptance of the demythologizing critique has profoundly affected the previous presumption of superiority which was (and is) deeply ingrained in the mythology of manifest destiny and American exceptionalism. Thus forty years ago liberalism entered a period of troubled soul-searching, which conservatism insisted was a liberal pathology, a neurosis, a breach of faith with the obvious truth of biblical revelation and the status of American superiority.

Inclusiveness for liberals has meant reaching out to those whom the mythology previously kept in their places: racial minorities, indigenous cultures, women, and homosexuals. Embracing the heterodox has meant distancing from the assertive, arrogant superiority of mythological victory and taking seriously, in a new and truly attentive way, other religions and even the rejection of religion. It may not be exactly true to say, as Bacevich does, that these lineal descendants have vacated the public square. It’s not that simple. To move in the direction of heterodox inclusiveness requires a kind and depth of self-critical thought that, especially in its early stages, involves psychological conflict and suffering. In the past forty years the movements for civil rights, feminism, and the environment have challenged, explicitly or implicitly, all the privileges and prerogatives of the dominant white male society.

Meanwhile the public square has, in a certain sense, abandoned the lineal descendants. As a result of embracing the inclusionary and heterodox, liberals were deserted by a huge proportion of white society. A major example occurred in the aftermath of civil rights legislation in the 1960s. The white South, previously aligned with the Democratic Party, switched to the Republicans, a shift in party loyalty which is at least as strong a factor in the rise of the Christian Right as the Vietnam defeat.

The current strength of the Christian Right is based on a messy mix of anxiety, suspicion, resentment, and reaction. These feelings are attached to ongoing uneasiness regarding the complaints of minorities, from the consequences of slavery to the extermination of self-sufficient Native American cultures to the immigration of peoples like the Hmong, whose lives were disrupted by U.S. intervention and war. Racial prejudice has not gone away. Resentment toward women still deeply infiltrates male consciousness. To take the environmental critique seriously is to foster an awareness of ecological limitation which has pervasive economic and public policy ramifications in the direction of frugality.

Bacevich essentially perpetuates the notion that liberalism has devolved into a peculiar elite snobbism and is composed of a self-selected group of wealthy bleeding-hearts hopelessly bogged down politically by all the needy, whining tails that wag the dog—minorities, women, tree-huggers, peaceniks, animal-rights enthusiasts, vegetarians, gun-controllers, homosexual sissies, and so on and on. Opposed to this pathetic grab-bag are the *real* Americans who work for a living and don't complain, who go to church and pay taxes, who are patriotic and think global warming, like evolution, is a stupid liberal theory.

Yet for all its flaws and floundering, this liberalism of heterodox inclusion represents a serious attempt to grapple with real and pressing issues. It is terribly constrained by the

righteous judgmentalism of the so-called conservatives as well as by its own accrued habits of affluence and comfort. Maintenance of the economic status quo has a wide array of self-interested advocates, from huge corporations to the relatively poor shopper who loves Wal-Mart for its made-in-China bargains. Only Green politics is bold enough to call for a serious pruning of overdevelopment and lifestyles.

The wealthy, as always, have the money by which political candidates are made or unmade. The big media are owned by the same economic class. The capitalist ideology of perpetual economic growth, of continuous affluence, represents a big hunk of our secular mythology, our unacknowledged linkage to the privileged “American dream.” The Christian Right provides cover for the evasion of self-examination and repentance. It keeps uneasy feelings at bay and gives comfort to the comfortable with teachings about how God wants Christians to prosper and how (as Bill Moyers has shown) pollution and resource exhaustion don’t matter, because the end of the world will soon be upon us.

The Christian Right is the Anti-Jesus. For centuries Christian mythology slept in the same bed with gospel. When those lucid scientific discoveries shattered the historical veracity of Christian mythology, gospel realized with a shock that it was the only adult in that bed. It therefore sought to explain to mythology (no doubt rather condescendingly) that it needed to grow up. Mythology, governed internally by fear, responded by turning the political tables. And, as gospel invariably learns, the real path of the adult is crooked, narrow, rocky, and hard. Relatively few people tough it out.

Mythology meanwhile builds mega-churches on the broad highway, floods the airwaves, and gives confident reassurance to presidents, generals, and CEOs. It aligns itself with empire and turns its wrath on Gospel. This is the program of the Christian Right. If it succeeds, it will crumble and collapse. And the wailing of the deceived will be pitiful to hear.



It is astounding how frequently these days the references to the Christian Right and End Times show up in print and on talk radio. In a recent issue of *The Progressive*, there is an interview by Amitabh Pal with Randall Robinson, the founder of the TransAfrica Forum. In advising “progressives who feel beleaguered” Robinson says:

Something is very, very wrong with American culture. The signs are everywhere. I think the country is in almost terminal descent. The business class is combined with the evangelicals. And I think the evangelicals want to provoke an immense global disaster to precipitate the second coming of Christ.<sup>15</sup>

At the same time Gil Bailie says the scapegoat/sacrificial mythology “is collapsing, and good riddance, but if it collapses while the mimetic passions it existed to tame continue their explosive growth, it will collapse into the kind of pandemic crisis that sacrificial religion existed to prevent.” I think that the dismantling of sacrificial mythology is rapidly under way. It cannot be stopped, even (and paradoxically) as the Christian Right attempts to force its own system of sacred violence on the entire world.

The only way through this disaster is by the truth that penetrates and discloses the veil of myth, truth aided by servanthood and stewardship in the life-flow of the “powerless God of love.” For truth is the opposite of forgetting, just as love is opposite to the wrathful hysteria of those in thrall to the empire god of death.

### Notes

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- (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1966) and John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World* (New York, Harper Collins, 2001)
3. James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews* (New York, Houghton Mifflin, 2001); Barbara W. Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (N. Y., Alfred A. Knopf, 1984)
  4. Lifton and Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America*
  5. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, N.Y., Doubleday, 1965); Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* (Maryknoll, N. Y., Orbis Books, 2004)
  6. "Interview with John Dominic Crossan," and Paul Alan Laughlin, "Master Images of Jesus and Christ," both in *Zion's Herald*, July/August, 2005
  7. Benson Y. Landis, ed. and comp., *A Rauschenbusch Reader* (New York, Harper, 1957)
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  9. Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York, Crossroad Publishing, 1995)
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  12. Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1996)
  13. Chris Hedges, *The Christian Right and the Rise of American Fascism*, published on the internet by the Center for Religion, Ethics, and Social Policy at Cornell University ([www.theocracywatch.org/chris\\_hedges\\_nov24\\_04](http://www.theocracywatch.org/chris_hedges_nov24_04))
  14. Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (New York and London, Oxford University Press, 2005)
  15. Amitabh Pal, "Interview with Randall Robinson," in *The Progressive*, October, 2005





**Quaker Universalist Fellowship**