

“America, Theologically Considered”

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Introduction: Niebuhr's Prolepticism

Over fifty years ago, Reinhold Niebuhr warned that the United States could someday be guilty of committing the same sin it perceived all too well in the rise of communism: the irony of “pretension,” or national pride.

While the United States could at one time claim the “innocency of responsibility,” Niebuhr contends this is no longer the scenario. As a community that has emerged beyond our infancy and even needing to cautiously risk exercising our responsibility “beyond our own borders,” we nevertheless run the added risk of engaging in an unforeseen turn of events stemming from “our cherished values of individualism”:

Our exaltation of the individual involves us in some very ironic contradictions. On the one hand, our culture does not really value the individual as much as it pretends; on the other hand, if justice is to be maintained and our survival assured, we cannot make individual liberty as unqualifiedly the end life as our ideology asserts.¹

For those of us who share roots in the Reformation, we must own our own part in shaping that individualist culture; but there is

also a need to clarify our differences from this national scene as Niebuhr perceived it. Luther's *Freedom of the Christian* which underscored the individual freedom that comes by faith over all authority, and Calvin's emphases on providence and blessing were both regarded by Niebuhr as contributing to the current national pride. But Niebuhr was astute enough to note the appreciative differences between the Reformation and the accents on American individualism as well as divine providence and virtue in American democracy.² For Niebuhr, the Reformation had a stronger accent on the nature of human sin, which is missing in most American-nationalist perspectives. My sense is that a closer examination of Luther, if not also Calvin, would stress faith in Christ for the individual as distinct from, and perhaps also critical of, the prevailing concepts of individualism in American-nationalism today.

"Imperialism," Niebuhr contended, "is a perennial problem of human existence."³ Truth be told, he did not foresee this becoming the central problem of the United States, though he did regard it as an apt characterization of Marxist communism. Niebuhr believed that "modern democratic nations" have and would continue to have the checks and balances on their own power by (1) distributing economic and political power, thus preventing undue concentration of one or the other; (2) bring the use of power under social and moral review; and (3) establish inner religious and moral checks upon the use of power.⁴ At the time of his writing, Niebuhr was more concerned with a nuclear showdown that would result in one or the two superpowers of that time being able to claim victory. But he did not foresee what in fact transpired in just the last twenty years: the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and its aftermath of a declared economic victory; and the militant response of America to the perceived challenges of its economic and militaristic prowess on "9/11" (disguised as challenges to

“freedom”). Nonetheless, his opening words to his examination of American irony ring with a shuddering prophecy:

The victors ... face the ‘imperial’ problem of using power in global terms but from one particular center of authority, so preponderant and unchallenged that its world rule would almost certainly violate basic standards of justice.⁵

And his closing words would warn of a day of final doom:

if we [i.e., America] should perish ... the primary cause would be that the strength of a giant nation was directed by eyes too blind to see all the hazards of the struggle; and the blindness would be induced not by some accident of nature or history but by hatred and vainglory.⁶

The question we must all ask, as we consider America theologically today is whether our own eyes are opened wide beyond the blindness, and/or whether they have been blinded further in our current cultural milieu.

The “signs of our times” in America in the 21st Century

There has been a wealth of literature which sheds light on the American landscape, all since the dawn of the new millennium.

In the popular and provocative analysis by a former Republican strategist, Kevin Phillips contends that the signs of our times point to the decline of the American empire. He cites six signs of imperial collapse:

1. widespread public concern over cultural and economic decay
2. growing religious fervor, church-state relationship, or crusading insistence

3. a rising commitment to faith as opposed to reason and a corollary downplaying of science.
4. a considerable popular anticipation of a millennial time frame: an epochal battle, emergence of the antichrist, or belief in an imminent second coming or Armageddon.
5. A tendency to a hubris-driven national strategic and military overreach, often pursuing abstract international missions that the nation can no longer afford, economically or politically.
6. [an addition on which he devotes considerable focus in a whole section of his book] high debt levels, accompanied by corrupt politics, hubris and international overreach.⁷

While the United States may seek to put some distance between their agenda from those of ancient and modern empires, Phillips maintains that these events were recurring patterns in the empires past of Rome, Spain, the Netherlands, and Great Britain.

Phillips is not alone, however, in so categorizing America as an imperialistic identity. Catherine Keller, for example, has starkly stated: "The question is not whether America is an empire, but only what kind."⁸ Prior empires, Keller contends, were cautious not to repeat the mistakes of predecessors; but America throws that caution to the wind, and "with a kind of questioning innocence (How can they hate *us*?)"⁹ Cornell West comments, "The rise of ugly imperialism has been aided by an unholy alliance of plutocratic [wealthy] elites and the Christian Right, and also by a massive disaffection of so many voters who see too little difference between two corrupted parties, with blacks being taken for granted by Democrats, and with the deep disaffection of youth."¹⁰

But it is not only the critical voices of the current American political landscape that share a sense of the nature of American imperialism. Advocates for this imperialist trajectory can be

found in the voices from the political and religious right. Lawrence Kaplan and William Kristol, for example, argued for the providential importance of fostering the Pax Americana for the world, and happily take the mantra of "God Bless America" as a theme of our desire for survival.¹¹ Impetus for this thinking has also been promulgated for twenty years now by right-winged religious affirmations, such as the bold pronouncement of George Grant of Coral Ridge Ministries:

Christians have an objective, a commission, a holy responsibility to reclaim the land for Jesus Christ—to have dominion in civil structures, just as in every other aspect of life and godliness. But it is dominion that we are after. Not just a voice. It is dominion we are after. Not just influence. It is dominion we are after. Not just equal time. It is dominion we are after. World conquest. That's what Christ has commissioned us to accomplish. We must never settle for anything less.... Thus, Christian politics has as its primary intent the conquest of the land—of men, families, institutions, bureaucracies, courts and governments for the Kingdom of Christ.¹²

Pat Robertson had made a similar claim in 1986: the goal is to "rule the world for God."¹³ More recently, legal analyst and respected author of *New York Times* bestsellers, Ann Coulter, laments why it is that liberals "deny the Biblical image of dominion and progress, the most ringing affirmation of which is the United States of America."¹⁴

To be sure, there are less polarized views that are seeking a path toward resolution that would bring parties of the right and left (or "red" and "blue," respectively) into a more congealed harmony. Jim Wallis and Michael Lerner, for example, contend that the religious right has a concern for religious integrity from which the left could learn and for which they hope can

develop a better spiritual agenda from the left.¹⁵ And Andrew Sullivan, a conservative, can see (even as Keller can) how fundamentalism in America is not all that different from fundamentalism elsewhere in the world: “As modernity advanced, and the certitudes of fundamentalist faith seemed mocked by an increasingly liberal society, evangelicals mobilized and entered politics. Their faith and zeal sharpened, the temptation to fuse political and religious authority beckoned more insistently. The result is today’s Republican Party, which is perhaps the first fundamentally religious political party in American history.”¹⁶

Mainline churches, including my own, while pastorally concerned, often miss the mark of the concerns that are really closest to the American public. Don Browning, Professor Emeritus of Religious Ethics and Social Sciences at the University of Chicago, recently commented on how the ELCA in the past decade has focused its social statements on important topics, to be sure, such as homosexuality, the commercialization of sexuality, abortion, abuse and sex trade, and teen-age sex, missed are what the social scientists of our time see as the more problematic issues in real life: divorce, poverty, cohabitation, and work and family issues.¹⁷ Furthermore, while I remain an adamant critic of Rick Warren’s bestseller, *The Purpose Driven Life*,¹⁸ and the religious marketing industry it has promulgated, I must admit (along with Michael Lerner) that it seems to have touched a cord of “meaning for lives,” which no publication from the left has yet managed to do as effectively—even if, as I honestly believe Warren’s work is, there is encouragement toward Pelagian solutions for life.¹⁹ Cornell West has, I think correctly, noted the damaging psychological effects of nihilism in American imperialism: “Psychic depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair are widespread in America as a whole.”²⁰ But his own argument, like that of others I have heard, is wrapped up in a kind of cynicism as to what to effectively do about it.²¹

Theological Reflections: Crossing America with law and gospel

Because the landscape is complex, and it is still part of our current history-in-the-making, there are no easy theological answers to the problems America faces. Yet I find Niebuhr's provocative and imaginative question as a good place to start: are our eyes too blind to see the hazards of the struggle?

Let me venture here three points (there are probably more we could offer) from the lens of the law/gospel tradition for ongoing reflection and conversation:

1. Seeing the log in our own eye before removing the speck in the eyes of others: Repentance as a theme for our time.

Repentance was the emphasis of the first of the 95 *Theses* of Luther: "When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said 'Repent', He called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."²² Among American Lutheran theologians, Robert W. Bertram and Edward Schroeder, have hit this theme long and hard. Bertram was already clear about this in regard to the American problem in a course he taught thirty years ago, during the bicentennial, with the same title for this essay: "America: Theologically Considered."²³ Bertram noted that "America is not simply 'out-there;' it is *in us*." And while Pogo once said, "we have found the enemy, and he is us," Pogo was only partially right. He did not consider that we may also be up against God. Bertram would not let us forget that theological point then, which also seems apropos today.

Schroeder has been even especially more pointed on this issue as it applies to the current American crisis. Not only in the

mantra of "God Bless America," but in the noted failures of many that our nation (both right and left) has yet to confess, penitently, our imperialism leaves us with a Manichean civil religion.²⁴

While I am grateful (even confessionally/theologically) that the American politic landscape has shifted of late to challenge the strong-war rhetoric that had pervaded our nation for the last several years, we have still not abandoned the depth of the scope of our American imperialism. Repentance is still not the dominant word. Resolve is, even if there is a different resolve between congress and the executive branches of our government.

2. Not seeing clearly with "both" eyes (and hands) of God: the need to dispel revelationism

A second point I would raise from a law/gospel perspective, following from the prior point, has to do with the nature of seeing the problem and its solution appropriately.

Most prognosticators of hope in the current imperialist climate, while I am deeply moved by their arguments, come up short in seeing this larger scope of the truth about God as both critic and giver of promise. For example, Michael Lerner uses the concepts of the "left hand of God" and the "right hand of God" in a manner that seems strange to me as a confessional theologian. Lerner associates the "right hand of God" with the Religious Right. In this perspective, "the universe [is] a fundamentally scary place filled with evil forces," and "God is the avenger, the big man in heaven who can be invoked to use violence to overcome those evil forces."²⁵ This tends to "validate an oppressive, dominating, fearful way of seeing."²⁶ By contrast, for Lerner, the "left hand of God" represents a voice for "compassion, love, generosity of spirit, kindness,

peace, social justice, environmental sanity, and nonviolence.”²⁷ For Lerner the problem is in a matter of how we choose to look upon God. The problem of Lerner’s explanation here is exacerbated by his sense, for which I would have preferred to see more evidence, that “human beings are theotropic—they turn toward the sacred—and that dimension cannot be fully extinguished. People feel a near-desperate desire to reconnect to the sacred, to find some ways to unite their lives with a higher meaning and purpose and in particular to that aspect of the sacred that is built upon the loving, kind, and generous energy in the universe that I [Lerner] describe as the ‘Left Hand of God.’”²⁸ To be sure, Lerner’s argument sounds much like one might find in either Erasmus or Schleiermacher. But his argument is weakened further by his own admissions that many of those in the leftist political expressions are lacking such a spiritual foundation. Why are these not sufficiently “theotropic”? And why is the Religious Right only “theotropic” with a vision of dominance and control? The real problem in Lerner’s assessment is that human beings are not perceptive enough of the real God at work in the world through the “left hand”(in which he has mixed elements of both law and gospel). In essence, therefore, Lerner’s perspective is revelationist—contending that our problem is with how we do not seem to sufficiently see God as good and merciful. With Lerner, I would contend for a left hand/right hand distinction, though with different understandings about the meaning of left hand and right hand. Yet the problem is not with our failures to see the real way God is active in the world, but it is a problem with the very God who is active in the world as our chief critic, from whom we need the liberation of Christ’s mercy. That would at least take seriously the half-truth evident in the Religious Right that maybe the reason the world seems so “scary” to some is that it is—theologically, and justifiably. But that is not the final solution we have in the fuller revelation of Christ’s

promise.

A similar point could be made of Catherine Keller's solution. She recommends that we appreciate the "interstices of our differences" with other people—"the between spaces, where our dimensions fold in and out of each other, in and out of God... We may read the world itself as genesis, a great poem of becoming. Let us then seek clues for our theopolitics—for the way change is initiated, the way a beginning is made—in the theopoetics of creation."²⁹ While I can be deeply appreciate and affirm her desire to promote an inter-religious, inter-personal dialogue in the world, she nonetheless understands the solution to our crisis as yet still to be discovered only by taking on the mystic, maybe even gnostic, challenge of discerning God's creational plan. How will understanding creation answer our plight? What if it only deepens our sense of the plight, theologically? Is Keller, the exegete as well as constructive theologian, grasping the biblical sense of "new creation" with all its Christological value as Paul (if not also John the apocalyptic seer) understood it?

Perhaps Cornell West, in his solutions, at least comes the closest to avoiding a collapse into a revelationist posturing. He recommends the need to return to a Socratic questioning, and understanding of justice in the Western religious tradition, and sense of tragic-comic hope as especially the black freedom struggle has come to grasp.³⁰ His solution, while not pointing as directly to the nature and work of God in the world as in Lerner and Keller, at least suggests some sources worthy of deeper examination. My sense is that if they were, we may come to an understanding of the revelation of God that brings both justice and mercy, both critical questioning as well as hope-filled answers, and the final comedy (or at least *hilaritas*) beyond the tragic.

The same concerns could be raised on how the Religious Right takes biblical literalism in such a way as to miss the depth of the judgment of God as well as the extensive power of the promises of God in Christ.

3. “Eyes on the Prize”: Seeing the Gospel at Stake

Perhaps my greatest concern today is that we are missing out on the centrality of the gospel of Jesus the Christ. This third point raises for me the most profound theological question, and one which I raise with the greatest fear and trepidation. In other words, I hope I am wrong on this point.

Along with all of the commentators on the American landscape these days, I have come to share the sense that the ideological divide in America is very deep indeed. If I had to throw my hat into the political ring, it would be more with the likes of Lerner, West, Keller, and Wallis than it would be with Coulter, Grant, Kaplan and Kristol. The former have the better argument, even for all my theological misgivings with their arguments.

Lerner and West both suggest the nature of the “unholy alliance” that has taken place between the Religious Right and the political right of American politics.³¹ Jim Wallis is also cognizant of this alliance, even seeing it as permeating the last two presidential elections, and encourages “to reassert and reclaim the gospel faith.” “We see that [this gospel] faith creates community from racial, class and gender divisions and prefers international community over nationalist religion, and we see that ‘God bless America’ is found nowhere in the bible.”³²

Having recently finished editing Robert W. Bertram’s book, *A Time for Confessing*, I wonder as I read such analyses whether

there is something about the nature of *status confessionis* in our current American imperialist crisis.

Bertram's examination was based on the Reformers' concept of *status confessionis* especially in Formula of Concord, Article 10. From his analysis of that confessional crisis and others in church history, Bertram elaborates six criteria about what constitutes "a time for confessing":

- 1) there are *witnesses* who are on trial for their faith, oppressed by authority, usually the church's own; but it is not only they who are persecuted, but the gospel itself;
- 2) these witnesses point to *the authority of the Gospel as authority enough* for the church's life and unity;
- 3) their witness is profoundly *ecumenical*, shared by the whole faithful church;
- 4) these witnesses, by their faithful testimony, *reprioritize* the evangelical authority of the church so that is not confused with the temporal authority of the law, and vice versa, the temporal authority of the law is not confused with the gospel.
- 5) these witnesses *appeal for and to the oppressed* who are afflicted in this time of oppression (which is also a time for confessing); and
- 6) no one is more aware of their *ambiguous certitude* in making this confession than the confessors themselves—but they are nonetheless right in making their confession.

Let me start with a qualification: any sense of connection between these criteria of *status confessionis* and our current crisis has not been fully established; and for that I would say, thank God. But there are signs, and I think deeply concerning signs, that legalistic and political agendas are already finding ways to permeate the church at many and varied levels, raising the stakes on what Cornell West sees as a matter of grave

concern: "We are losing the very value of dialogue—especially respectful communication—in the name of the sheer force of naked power."³³ I would say that is not only the value of dialogue, but the value of the gospel.

Futurists Marian Salzman and Ira Matathia have prognosticated that the religious trends in America in 2007 will include

- 1) a values-based culture war where people will continue to use religion to define where and how they live;
- 2) a trend of "us vs. them" that will divide not only denominations but also congregations and even households, particularly on the battle over gay rights, civil unions, and the definition of marriage;
- 3) a continuing trend toward a mainstream of Christian rock as the dominant metaphor for worship;
- 4) a continued blurring of church and state, such that Thomas Jefferson's wall between these entities will become even more fragile;
- 5) the increasing marketing of religion as big business, with churches serving more as distribution channels for their product and congregations as word-of-mouth promoters;
- 6) inversely, the commercialization of religion as a place for big businesses to promote their brand identities in the hearts and minds of congregations—both Christian and Muslim.³⁴

We can hope they are wrong. Or we can take it seriously enough to question whether such trends should and ought to be perceived as alarming for us all. When do we start calling these trends of legalism, exclusivism, culturalism, anti-intellectualism, consumerism and market-driven ideologies by what they really have become: alien gospels that seek to grasp the heart and soul of the church at large? If these trends continue, they will certainly divide us even further as a nation. But my concern is that they may also divide the churches of America.

If such is the case, the American churches must take off the blinders and look with eyes wide open, through the lens of the One who was crucified and risen for her very being, and confess that there is only One-Gospel-and-Sacraments that can be our enduring source of unity and hope. And that promise is for all.

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- 2 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man, Volume II*, (New York: Charles Scribners' Son, 1943), 184-212.; *Irony*, 43-64.
- 3 Ibid., 113.
- 4 Ibid., 135.
- 5 Ibid., 2.
- 6 Ibid., 174.
- 7 Kevin Phillips, *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century*, (New York: Viking/Penguin Press, 2006), 220.
- 8 Catherine Keller, *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 2005), 18.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Cornell West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight against Imperialism*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 2.
- 11 Keller, 23. Cf. Lawrence F. Kaplan and William Kristol, *The War Over Iraq: Saddam's Tyranny and America's Mission*, (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003).

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13 Lerner, 8.

14 Ann Coulter, *Godless: The Church of Liberalism*, (New York: Random House, 2006), 3.

15 Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2005); Lerner, *The Left Hand of God*, *op. cit.*

16 Andrew Sullivan, *The Conservative Soul: How We Lost It, How to Get it Back*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2006), 63-64. Cf. Keller, 9-10.

17 Don Browning, "Lutheran Discussions of Sexuality in Context," presented to the Lutheran Ethicists, Dallas, Texas, January 3, 2007. Interestingly, war and peace is not listed in any of the issues.

For a survey of several of Browning's writings on this subject, cf. Don S. Browning, *Equality and the Family: A Fundamental, Practical Theology of Children, Mothers, and Fathers in Modern Societies* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007). On the issues of poverty in America and its impact on work and families, cf. also Mark Robert Rank, *One Nation, Underprivileged: Why American Poverty Affects Us All*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

18 Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What On Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002).

19 Lerner, 43.

20 West, 26.

21 Ibid., 7. Similar statements of hopelessness in the face of the challenge of our times were expressed in the responses of liberationists at the Society of Christian Ethics, Marc H. Ellis, Irfan A. Omar, and Miguel A. De La Torre, "Are the Ethics with Liberation Theology Still Alive and Relevant? An Interfaith Conversation," Dallas, Texas, January 5, 2007.

22 *LW* 31, 25.

23 At Christ Seminary-Seminex, Summer, 1976.

24 This is evident in several of Edward Schroeder's Thursday Theologies published on the Crossings website, www.crossings.org. A similar argument has been made by Bruce Lincoln, "Bush's God talk," *Christian Century*, October 5, 2004.

25 Lerner, 2.

26 Ibid., 5.

27 Ibid., 5-6.

28 Ibid., 2.

29 Keller, 137.

30 West, 16ff.

31 Lerner, 1; West, 2.

32 Wallis, 4.

33 West, 7.

34 Marian Salzman and Ira Matathia, *Next Now: Trends for the Future*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

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