

Progressive Religion ... is Not an Oxymoron!

By David E. Roy

The social and political progressive movements in the United States often have had an uneasy and ambivalent relationship with religion. Unfortunately, there are all too many good reasons for this rocky relationship: Some of the most visible religious leaders are vigorously outspoken in their opposition to many of the specific goals progressives hold the most dear, goals that aim to bring about peace and justice for all. To make matters worse, these religious leaders claim to be rooted in the center of their religious traditions. They cite numerous sacred texts to prove this.

And yet there are an enormous number of religious leaders and followers, liberal as well as conservative, who do not align themselves with these firebrands. It is important that social and political progressives understand that they have strong allies among the religious progressives; and to understand what about their religion that motivates them to act on behalf of the progressive values of peace and justice for all.

This need is what gave birth to the idea of a short series of articles that hope to bring the news of what is happening in various progressive religious movements, including Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and Buddhist, to the readers of Fresno's Community Alliance.

The topic for this first article is a look at some of the progressive Christian responses to the American Empire.

The Reality of American Empire

During the current administration, the veil has been lifted on a long-standing issue concerning the nature of the relationship the US has with the rest of the world. For many years (some would say since our nation's founding), there have been imperialistic dimensions to our international relationships. However, US leaders consistently have denied that we have sought to be a global empire by means of our economic and military power. Today, however, the neoconservative movement that has dominated the Bush Administration's political, social, judicial, and military decisions and actions has also made it crystal clear that we *are* an empire and that this is a good thing. They have seen this as something to be reinforced wherever and whenever possible by whatever means necessary.

In addition to some of the most obvious actions taken in recent years to expand the role of the American Empire (e.g., the invasion and occupation of Iraq and the Patriot Act), the administration's neocons have mounted a largely invisible, skillfully engineered and highly successful legal campaign within the government to accrue nearly absolute power to the executive branch. This campaign has been waged largely out of sight until very recently. (For the history and details of this largely unchecked campaign see Charlie Savage's *Takeover: The Return of the Imperial Presidency*.) The

American empire now has an emperor with all the unilateral, unchecked power necessary to impose his will upon the world.

So, what has this got to do with Christianity? More than a century of biblical research by thousands of scholars has brought to light some important facts concerning this historical Jesus, the context for his ministry, and the nature of the early Christian church.

These academic biblical scholars, at least the vast majority, for a long time have described Jesus of Nazareth as a Jewish rabbi who lived, preached, and acted in the midst of a people who were under the fierce control of the Roman Empire. Virtually everything about his brief recorded ministry must be understood in that context. This perspective extends to the writings of the apostle Paul as well as to most of the other books of the Christian New Testament. This even includes the book of Revelation!

This means, for example, that when Jesus is quoted as speaking of the Kingdom or Reign of God, this needs to be understood (and would have in that day) as being in direct contrast to the oppressive Kingdom or Reign of Caesar. This was a subversive viewpoint. When his early followers called Jesus, "Lord," this was in opposition to the requirement to call only Caesar, "Lord." This was a subversive act.

Jesus' concern for the poor and oppressed, which is considered central to his ministry by most Christians, also must be seen in this context. In fact, many progressive Christians, with the support of leading biblical and theological scholars, believe that Jesus' outspoken opposition to the greed and power of the Roman Empire was what led to his gruesome execution at the hands of the ruling power of the day. The emperor and his advisors do not like to have their priorities challenged.

Bad Theology can be Dangerous

The book of Revelation has been used for many years to divide Christians from non-Christians, and even Christians from Christians. Recently it has been given massive attention through the Left Behind mega-business involving books, films, and even video games. The interpretation given to the meaning of the book's highly symbolic and metaphorical content by this series is dramatic and quite dark. In essence, those Christians who are "true" Christians will be spared from and joined with God by means of the Rapture. Everyone else will be "left behind" and, if they do not convert, they will be plunged into the fiery abyss of hell. This is something like a 24 series for Christians.

However, many serious scholars would disagree and argue instead that Revelation is to be understood as depicting a hoped-for scenario for the evil Roman Empire. This year's local Interfaith Scholar Weekend, for example, included New Testament scholar Prof. Barbara Rossing (Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago) who made this point quite clearly (see her book, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in The Book of Revelation*). Another New Testament scholar, Prof. Marcus Borg (Oregon State University in Corvallis), who has visited Fresno several times in the past two decades, makes the same argument in his recent book, *The Heart of Christianity*.

Nonetheless, there are Christian leaders (John Hagee, for example) who subscribe to the dark picture and its accompanying storyline. This, in brief, requires Israel to be restored. This is followed by a cataclysmic (i.e., nuclear) struggle in the Middle East – at which point the world as we know it would be utterly destroyed. The danger is that some of those who believe in this story are actively trying to promote a war in the Middle East. They are promoting a war in the name of the Prince of Peace.

A Christian Response to American Empire

Perhaps the best book on the topic of the Christian response to American Empire is *American Empire and the Commonwealth of God*, by David Ray Griffin, John B. Cobb Jr., et. al. (Cobb is considered by many to be one of the most important theologians of our time and is someone who has long been concerned about the impact of our current form of global economy in relationship to the human community and the environment. [See *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Toward Community, the Environment, and a Sustainable Future*, by former World Bank senior economist Herman Daly and Cobb.] Griffin, a former student of Cobb, has written extensively in many areas of philosophy. Interestingly, he is one of the top 100 recommended scholars to read in China today.)

In this brief book (181 pages), the authors present a clear history of American Empire, particularly since the end of WWII. They argue persuasively that American Empire is neither accidental nor benign. They go below the surface and present information not readily available in the mainstream media. For example, in terms of military domination, they mention a little known fact about US policy for space (the US Space Command). One component of this is called *Global Strike* which would permit us to destroy anything anywhere on the planet within 45 minutes. (p. 13) This is a potent form of world domination.

Whereas military imperialism tends to be largely obvious, economic imperialism is often neither obvious nor of great interest to most people. The chapters on our economic imperialism, however, make it painfully clear what far-reaching and disastrous effects our economic “way of life” has had on a vast number of impoverished nations around the world.

The authors assert that economic theory has become the *de facto* religion of our culture. In the economic current model, there is “no place for community, no place for justice, and no place for the natural world.” (p. 23) Instead of the economy being in the service of society and the environment, it is the other way around: Society and the natural world have become subordinate to economic theory. Current economic theory and practices do not benefit the common good; instead, they benefit transnational corporations, governments, and the “elites” who have the power personally and through these institutions to make things happen – or not.

The authors call for the citizens of the world to make radical changes. These changes are ones that are in keeping with the deepest religious values reflected in the teachings and actions of Jesus to seek justice for all and to oppose economic systems that are inherently unjust, even when these systems are maintained and enforced by an

empire ... Roman or American. These deep religious values are quite similar to ones that can be found in Judaism, Islam and Buddhism.

These ideals are a challenge to follow and promote within our culture, the culture of empire. As Alliance readers know all too well, people who lift up these ideals are often ignored, marginalized, or attacked. When social, political and religious progressives are able to join together, the result will be greater strength in the efforts to realize these ideals here in the real world.

I invite readers to share with me your feedback and your questions and concerns on the topic of progressive religion. The only requirement I have is that whatever dialogue we have must remain respectful. You can reach me via admin@cctnet.com. Thank you!

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