

The Unholiest Alliance: The Christian Right and Power Politics

By Tarcisio Beal

One visible sign of the moral and political crisis now engulfing our society is the collusion between the Christian Right leadership and some of the most powerful political and financial powers of the nation. The association of religion with the civil authorities and the elites who control political power has a long history of betrayal of the most fundamental principles and values of Christianity. A sad story has been, until Vatican II (1962), the abuse of Church power and authority against those persons who were branded as **“heretics,”** mostly because they did not conform with clerical indoctrination, including absolute papal authority. Pope Innocent III’s encyclical *Cum ex Officii Nostri* (1207) delegated authority to States to wage war on the heretics. The war against the **Albigensians** of Southern France, who were caught in the conflict between the kings and the nobility, **cost the lives of more than 1 million people.** During the siege of Béziers, the army commander Simon de Montfort asked the papal Legate whether his soldiers should burn down the city because the majority of the inhabitants were not heretics. Answered the Legate: “Go ahead, kill them all! God will know which ones were the faithful Catholics.”

The **Jews** were also a constant target of the Church and the civil powers. Mob violence against them turned deadly especially in **medieval Germany**, although several bishops protected them. In the late 10th and 11th centuries, the **crusaders**, an odd mix of monks and warriors (Templars, Hospitallers, Teutonic Knights, etc.), stirred the crowds against the Jews and even gathered them to go to Palestine to recover the Holy Land from the hands of the Muslim Turks: Jerusalem was turned into a river of blood and thousands were slaughtered, including women and children fleeing the city. In 1442, Pope Eugen IV issued the following orders: “We decree and order that from now on, and for

all the time, Christians should not eat or drink with Jews, not admit them to feasts, nor cohabit nor bathe with them. Christians should not allow Jews to hold civil honors over Christians, or to exercise public offices in the in the state.”¹ Persecution and discrimination against the Jews continued unabated until the days of Pius IX in late 19th century, except in most of medieval **Spain** where, despite the anti-Jew decree of the Council Lateran IV (1215), the Jews were seldom persecuted until 1478, when King Ferdinand of Aragón and Queen Isabel of Castile were granted control of the Inquisition to hunt down the Jews.

Furthermore, from the 1530s and all the way into the 19th century, the Church **failed to protect the Africans brought to the Americas as slaves in large numbers.** The Jesuits, who made up the Church’s most powerful religious Order and who advised the pope since the Council of Trent, used their own fleet to carry thousands of African slaves to Brazil, and even used them in their *colégios*. Yet, C. Williams’ article in the 1983 issue of the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, still denies the facts: “The Church unreservedly condemned colonial slavery and every type of slave trade as inhuman and immoral.”

Neither did Protestantism (Lutheranism, Calvinism, Puritanism, and Anglicanism in the American South) take up the defense of Native Americans and Africans. The Puritan Pilgrims who settled New England in 1620, grabbed the lands of the Native Americans and forced them out of the region. They are mostly remembered by their obsession with Satan and the infamous Salem Witchcraft Trials. One great irony of American history is that most of the **Founding Fathers were not**

Many Jesuit brothers accepted slavery and aided in transporting thousands of African slaves to Brazil. Jesuit Peter Claver, however, saw the slaves as fellow Christians and his apostolate extended beyond his care for them. He was known as the “slave of the slaves” and his advocacy for them earned him sainthood.





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ted to a specific Christian denomination, but were followers of the 18th century's socio-political philosophy of the Enlightenment. That's why most of the contents of the American Constitution carry Christian values. Benjamin Franklin even declared that the love of God requires that we fully love our neighbor.

The history of the Confederacy, however, is one of constant betrayal of true Christianity, most obviously displayed by the enslavement of Africans and the slaughter of Native Americans. The slaves were to be brought into Christianity, but mostly to render blind obedience to their white masters. South Carolina's Anglican clergyman **Francis Le Jeau** issued this instruction for the slaves undergoing baptism: "That you do not ask for the holy baptism out of the desire to free yourself from the Duty/Obedience you owe to your Master while you live."² The State of Alabama, all the way to the mid-1960s, especially during the years of Governor **Barry Goldwater**, is a story of the ugly domination of racism and the denial of basic human rights until the prophetic campaign of Martin Luther King and the enactment of the 1965 Civil Rights Act.

At the end of the 20th century, the religious and socio-political crisis of the South gave rise to **Evangelicalism** which now congregates more than one hundred million middle-class followers. Best exemplified by televangelist **Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition**, which united political militancy with biblical quotes and stories, especially by applying them to what it perceived as contradictions of Christianity by Catholics and other Christian denominations: abortion rights, transgenders' rights, the absence of prayers in the public schools, etc. Roy Moore, Alabama's Supreme Court Justice, recently tried to justify the State's courts' authority to cancel civil rights guaranteed by the Constitution and now being negated by most of the States controlled by republican governors: "No court has any authority to redefine what God proposed in *Genesis*." So now the androcentrism and antifeminism of the author of *Genesis* must be applied to contemporary America!...

The spread of Evangelicalism was enhanced by the weekly newspaper "sermons" and the autobiography (*Just As I am*) of **Billy Graham** who preached that "faith is all that is needed for salvation."³ An emphasis on prayers without justice and the imitation of the example of Jesus has facilitated the evan-

gelicals' association with the power elites and other conservative religious groups that defend and practice **White Nationalism**, also referred to as **White Supremacy**, both originally tied to **Anglo-Saxonism**. In his book *Our Country* (1898), Congregational minister **Josiah Strong**, a strong proponent of American missionary expansion, characterized Anglo-Saxonism as "divinely commissioned" to spread the blessings of political liberty and Protestant Christianity, Anglo-Saxonism carries the presumption that White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant (WASP) peoples are the superior race and destined by God to rule the world while obedience to the pope (*'Popery'*) results in an inferior, degraded people who dig their own burials.

Walter Wash, a popular English author of late 19th century, thus advertised Anglo-Saxon superiority:

"Looking around the world, we find that Popery degrades the nations... Would English working men wish to exchange wages with their brethren in any Catholic country in the world?... The answer to this question must be that the religion of Popery is at the bottom of the marked difference."⁴

The WASP ideology grew steadily with the English imperial expansion into North America and Africa and the propagation of Social Darwinist concept of the "survival of the fittest" plus anti-Catholicism.⁵ In the United States, such white nationalism, and its pretense of being Christian, was clearly spelled out in **President William McKinley** in his 1898 **Address to justify the conquest of the Philippines**. After declaring that he had prayed to Almighty God for light and guidance, he went on:

"And it came to me this way: (1) That we could not give them back to Spain – it would be cowardly and dishonorable; (2) that we could not turn them over to France or Germany that would be bad business and discreditable; (3) that we could not leave them to govern themselves – they were unfit for self-government... and (4) that there was nothing left for us to do but to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them all and, by God's grace, do the very best we could by them as our fellow men for whom Christ also died."⁶

MAGA's White Nationalism, with all its racism and

anti-Semitism, has been growing steadily in our society since “Trumpism” gained control of the republican party. Recently, Congresswoman Lauren Boebert said this about the movement that supports a woman’s right to abortion: “The Satanic Temple is now opening abortion clinics that will perform abortion as a satanic ritual.”

Right-wingers even oppose the teenage transgenders’ participation in sports. Evangelical preachers draw large audiences into their churches and auditoria and entertained them with biblical stories, leaving out anything that contradicts them and seldom addressing socio-political issues. Sometimes biblical statements are even twisted in order to justify total obedience to the laws. *Deuteronomy* 27: 26, for example (“Cursed be everyone who does not persevere in observing everything prescribed in the book of Law”), is said to repeat Galatians 3:11, but the apostle Paul says the opposite, that no one is justified by the law.

On the other hand, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Methodist, Evangelical dissenters, and Catholic leaders have been reviewing their pastoral care. The Episcopalians, for instance, organized the “**Poor People’s Campaign**” of support and enhancement of public programs that target first and foremost the poor, the needy, and the sick. On September 24, 2022, the **First Christian Church of Katy, TX**, carried out a “**Drag Bingo**” to demonstrate its support for the LGBTQ people and highlight that discrimination and hatred are totally unchristian and immoral. Not surprisingly, Katy’s church became a target of vandalism and of online, Facebook hatred. It all backfired, however, because church attendance and support for Katy’s First Christian Church grew by 30%. There are many truly Christian organizations, including most of the Catholic women’s religious Orders and a good number of dioceses/archdioceses like San Antonio’s, that take seriously Jesus’ command of “love thy neighbor” and do not simply rely on prayers and holy devotions.

The one central Christian doctrine which spells out the example of Jesus and the ultimate message of the Gospels is that our love of God is authentic only when connected with love and care of our neighbor. This message is very much emphasized in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. When the Pharisees asked Jesus: “Teacher, which is **the greatest commandment of the law**, Jesus answered: “**You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments**” (Mt 22: 34-40; cf. Mk 12: 28-31, Lk 10: 29-37). Therefore, church attendance, prayers, sacraments, etc. might help, but without the love of neighbor they lose all their meaning.

One of the most glaring abuses of the Bible is the idea that God does everything, including bad weather and the climatic disasters, and even decides elections. Oklahoma’s Senator James Inhof

blames God Himself for the world’s pollution: “The arrogance of people to think that we, human beings, would be able to choose what He is doing in the climate is to me outrageous.”⁷ In 2017, Minnesota’s ex-presidential candidate Michelle Bachman and Evangelical pastor Franklin Graham asserted that the presidential election of Donald J. Trump was God’s choice. This past Sunday, August 13, 2023, a preacher of one of the big churches of San Antonio, was explaining to his large audience why there have been so many climatic tragedies and quoted 1 *Kings* 17: 1-10: “Lord, all depends on You, not on you!” Forget that the climatic crisis is the result of human pollution of the planet and that God created humans with free will to shape their ultimate destiny!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Lutheran theologian who frontally opposed Nazism, even before Hitler came to power, and ended up hanged in the Concentration Camp of Flossenbürg on April 9, 1945, constantly urged Christians to concentrate in facing the world’s evil: “**Worldliness** (the presence of God in the reality of the world) characterizes the nature of God and is a prominent trait of the God of the Bible.” Bonhoeffer was greatly distressed by “cheap grace,” the kind of “Sunday Christianity” that relies on prayers, songs, and monetary donations to keep the institution going.⁸ So many churches, so many prayers, so many sermons; emphasis on charity, but not much involvement in social justice.

Christians, Jews, and all men and women of good will need to engage in an urgent, inter- denominational dialogue to reshape a society and a nation which routinely betray the central teachings of the Bible and the example of Jesus. We fully agree with Sr. Miriam Therese Winter, Professor of the Hartford, CT, Seminary: “The primary source of God’s Revelation is not in the Bible. It’s life.”⁹ It is, for every Christian, to live a life based on the example of Jesus, period.

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