

## ***Jesus vs. Empire***

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*Patriotism is not only a legitimate sentiment, but a duty... We cannot more efficiently labor for the good of all... than be pledging heart, brain, and hands to the services of keeping our country true to its mission, obedient to its idea... The world waits to see the quality and energy of our patriotism. —The Rev. Thomas Starr King (1824-1864)*

*Religion, we are told, is a private, personal thing, a concern between the individual and God... I would maintain that religion is eminently a social principle, entering into social life, as having most important bearings on the public weal. —William Ellery Channing*

### **Ancient Witness: Mt. 5:38-45**

Today is the Fourth of July weekend, and all around the country there will be sermons and services of worship celebrating the United States of America. And there's much to celebrate, no doubt about that. However, today I want to talk about patriotic responsibilities. Jesus, my primary spiritual teacher, demonstrated a true patriotism when *he challenged the Empire*.

Some years ago I read a book by David Korten, *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*. And the basic thrust of the book is this:

*The human species is entering a period of dramatic and potentially devastating change as the result of forces of our own creation that are now largely beyond our control. It is within our means, however, to shape a positive outcome if we choose to embrace the resulting crisis as an opportunity to lift ourselves to a new level of species maturity and potential...*

*We now have the means to end the five-thousand-year era of Empire that has reproduced hierarchies of domination at all levels of human organization. A global cultural and spiritual awakening is building momentum toward the birthing of a new era of Earth Community based on a radically democratic partnership model of organizing human relationship.*

On one hand, part of what Korten and others are saying is devastating: for over 5,000 years, human culture has been dominated by ruthless competition for power and material goods. The prevailing model of human culture is one marked by hierarchy and dominance. From the empires of Mesopotamia of Assyria and Babylon, to the Egyptian Empire, to the Greeks, the Roman Empire to modern European empires and the super-powers of our current era—human development has been marked by violence, exploitation, war, greed and exclusion. And it is all culminating in the possibility of environmental, economic, and social collapse. Not a happy summary.

Many think of the U.S. as an empire, dominating and imposing its will throughout the globe. And there is much truth to this, as there are 700 to 800 military bases worldwide. And more than half of our federal budget every year goes toward military spending.

But the new emerging Empire in which we live is not a nation-state. It is not marked by geographical borders. The new emperors are a tiny elite group, who have amassed great wealth, and who try to control and manipulate the traditional political processes. As the infamous Panama Papers revealed, an astonishing \$21 to \$32 trillion of global private financial wealth has been invested virtually tax free through the world's black hole of secret tax havens. The new Empire, it seems to me, is corporate power that imposes its rule not via the sword but via money. And they use the apparatus of nations as client kings, like Herod, to rule on their behalf.

One of the strategies is to impose austerity: cuts in public spending, privatization of services, and the like, in order to amass greater and greater wealth in a downward spiral of inequality.

When I lived in Chicago, I participated in “Moral Mondays” which started in North Carolina and spread to Illinois, to resist this new empire of wealth and finance, which seeks to impose austerity measures.

In Illinois, the results were cuts to services for the poor—closing homeless shelters—cuts in wages as unions were broken—cuts in pensions, sending retirees into poverty—and the like. Several of my colleagues were arrested to draw attention to the way in which empire was operating there. One of our chants was, “Love you neighbor as yourself; tax the rich and share the wealth.”

And while sharing the wealth is precisely what the new economic Empire wants to avoid, the alternative is social disintegration and a dystopian world that our children will inherit.

Nationally, we have seen the austerity agenda in efforts to take away health insurance from millions of people, while giving a huge tax cut to billionaires. There has been a massive transfer of wealth from the 99% to those at the very top.

Some politicians are still justifying this by using an economic theory made popular by Ronald Reagan, saying that by giving money to big corporations and the super-wealthy, prosperity will miraculously “trickle down” to everyone else. Even though this ideology of the Empire has been thoroughly and overwhelmingly discredited, many still promote it, calling for cuts in Social Security, education, environmental protections, programs for children and the poor, and livable wages. Even George Bush senior called this “voodoo economics,” and he was right.

But Korten was ultimately optimistic. He believes that we are at a remarkable point of being able to transition out of this model. We face a moment of truth. Future generations will either speak of this time at the Great Turning or the Great Unraveling.

And today I just want to focus on the idea of how religion, or our concept of God, has either promoted or challenged Empire.

About 30 years ago, cultural historian, Riane Eisler, wrote a groundbreaking book, *The Chalice and the Blade*, in which she said that early in human development, society was organized by what she called the partnership model. She said, “One of the best-kept historical secrets is that practically all the material and social technologies fundamental to civilization were developed before the imposition of a dominator society.” Things like the domestication of plants and animals, food production and storage, building and clothing construction. And many of the god images at this time were female. God was a woman, focusing on the generative power of both the feminine and masculine.

Then what happened, according to Eisler, was that nomadic tribes emerged out of the settled agriculturalist societies. The nomadic tribes focused not on technologies of production, but technologies

of destruction beginning what she called “a bloody five-thousand-year domination detour.” Not surprisingly, God turned into a god who was exclusively male.

Martin Marty once wrote about how the monarchical model of God can foster Empire:

*Believe in one all-powerful God. Believe that his God has enemies. Believe that you are charged to serve the purposes of God against those enemies. Believe that a unique and absolute holy book gives you directions, impulses, and motivations to prosecute war. You have then, a formula for crusades, holy wars, jihads, and as we have learned, terrorism that knows no boundaries.*

Now here is the main point that I want to make today: These two worldviews—the partnership model of both the female and male perspective and the patriarchal dominator model—are both in our Bible and religious tradition. In the Bible there are two irreconcilable images of God, one that is anti-Empire and one that is complicit with Empire, and they run side by side.

A old friend of mine from Minneapolis, Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, has written that as citizens and as Christians, we must choose between the violent-God tradition that is complicit with Empire and the nonviolent-God tradition. He refers to an alternative to the way of Empire as a “republic,” which is concerned with the well-being of all its citizens with a larger community of nations. He writes:

*Citizens must choose between empire and republic. You can begin to test the difference between republic and militarized empire if you can imagine a nation known for its windmills, effective local and regional transportation systems, hybrid cars, universal health care system, quality housing and education, diverse agriculture, varied arts and culture, fair tax system, generosity and compassion, support for international law and institutions, low poverty rate, clean air and water, sustainable economy, equity, nonviolent conflict resolution, commitments to peace and enlightened foreign policies.*

So he says that as citizens we are faced with a choice, but also as Christians, we “must reject Christian complicity with empire.” This merging together causes two things: “Christianity is distorted because of empire” and “a destructive U.S. empire is made possible, at least in part, because of a distorted Christianity.” In his book, *Saving Christianity from Empire*, he says that in the violent God stream, there are three basic storylines.

First is the **exodus**, which highlights God’s **liberating violence**. This said that God intervened in history on behalf of a chosen people who were oppressed by the Egyptian Empire. God orders them to take control of a land occupied by others through bloody warfare. God’s promise to Abraham is that he will be the father of an empire, “a great and mighty nation,” it says. In response to Abraham’s willingness to kill his son, Isaac, God says: “I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of the heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring will possess the gate of their enemies.”

Second is the storyline of the **exile**, which highlights God’s **punishing violence**. This said that the people of Israel had displeased God, and this triggered God’s punishing violence through these other regimes, explaining why they were a defeated, enslaved people. This also included a promise that there would be a glorious reversal in fortune and restoration to greatness.

Finally, the third storyline is about God’s **vindicating violence** at the **end of history**. Like the exile storyline, the apocalyptic view responded to disappointments and calamities. When the glorious

reversal didn't appear the hope shift from this earthy existence to the end of history, that God would win a final cosmic battle against evil, that God would end the world, punish evildoers, and vindicate the faithful with a heavenly reward. This view is in both the Old and New Testaments of our bible. Nelson-Pallmeyer makes that point that sometimes these violent God perspectives appear to be anti-Empire, but in fact, they simply replace one empire with another.

Jesus represented the other stream, renouncing violence, preaching unconditional love, siding with the poor and the oppressed, teaching followers to live by values antithetical to the way of Empire. He, like the Hebrew prophets before him, advocated a life of active non-participation in the Empire's corruption of the soul.

Now at the birth of Jesus, Rome was the prevailing Empire. Its oppressive power affected all aspects of life in first-century Palestine. Its system of taxes, tribute, and commercialization of land impoverished many peasants. Its brutality featured massacres and crucifixions of perceived rebels. They appointed client-kings, such as Herod, and co-opted the temple and religious leaders. *When Empire co-opts religion you get a God and a religion of violence.*

Tacitus, an historian in the first and second century C.E., quoted a Caledonian Chieftain:

*[The Romans are] the plunderers of the world... They rob, butcher, plunder, and call it "empire"; and where they make desolation, they call it "peace."*  
(from *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*, by Richard Horsley)

William Sloane Coffin, that great liberal preacher, once said that there are three kinds of patriots. Two of them are bad, one is good. The bad patriots are the "uncritical lovers" and the "loveless critics." The good patriot is one who "carries on a lover's quarrel" with one's country. When our nation collaborates with Empire, when it operates like Herod, it is our patriotic duty to name it and resist it. Jesus challenged the religious nationalism of Herod and calls us to challenge the idolatry of Christian nationalism today.

The real Jesus' nonviolent strategy to resisting empire: First, and foremost, the love of enemies. Empire is based, page after page, on the hatred and defeat of enemies. Jesus opposed this. He advocates a model for creative nonviolent action. (Turning the other cheek, giving you cloak, going the extra mile.) He teaches the kingdom or "empire" of God is not an empire at all. It is like a mustard seed, a small, modest affair that is subversive and spreads like a weed. Jesus looked at the unjust world of first-century Palestine and saw abundance rather than scarcity, enough for everyone. He saw in God not punishment but unlimited grace, and that heaven is not something merely in the future, it is in the present moment, surrounding us every minute of every day and inviting us to nonviolently resist injustice and to embrace the abundance in life.

The commitment to Jesus' nonviolence lasted almost 300 years. "It is noteworthy," John Driver wrote, "that between 100 and 313 no Christian writers, to our knowledge, approved of Christian participation in warfare." And Christianity moved from being a nonviolent, minority religion persecuted by Empire to being a violent, official religion of the Roman Empire when Constantine was converted to Christianity.

I put a symbol of Christianity promoting empire on the bulletin—the shield of the Crusades with the cross on it. Even today, with patriotic fervor, Christianity is used to serve the empire.

Jesus was hijacked. The irony is incredible. The cross was Rome's preferred instrument of state terror; Jesus, a founder of an anti-Roman Jewish reform movement, was crucified by the Empire with support from collaborating members of the Jewish aristocracy and priestly elites. Jesus resisted Roman power through nonviolent means, taught love of enemies, and warned that using violence led to more violence. When early Christians declared that "Christ is Lord," this was in direct opposition to Rome. About 40 years before Jesus' birth, the Roman Senate declared the emperor Julius Caesar divine. His son, Octavius, was called the "son of the divine one." And so when Mark's gospel starts out, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," it's a direct challenge to Caesar, Herod and the Empire! It's a deliberate contrast of peace through military victory and brutal policing with a peace through justice and fairness.

So if you want to know where God is working, look not to the empire, but to the victim of the Empire, the ones crucified by the empire. Look to the one who is resisting the way of Empire—resisting the way of domination, exploitation and force, resisting violence and suppression, resisting concentrated power of a few over the many, resisting the extraction of wealth from the many for the obscene accumulation of wealth of a few. Look instead to the one who calls for a non-violent revolution to a different way, a way of shared power and shared prosperity, of true democracy and participation—a way of love.

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*

**Continued reading:**

John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now*

Richard Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*

David Korten, *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*

Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Saving Christianity from Empire*

Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade*